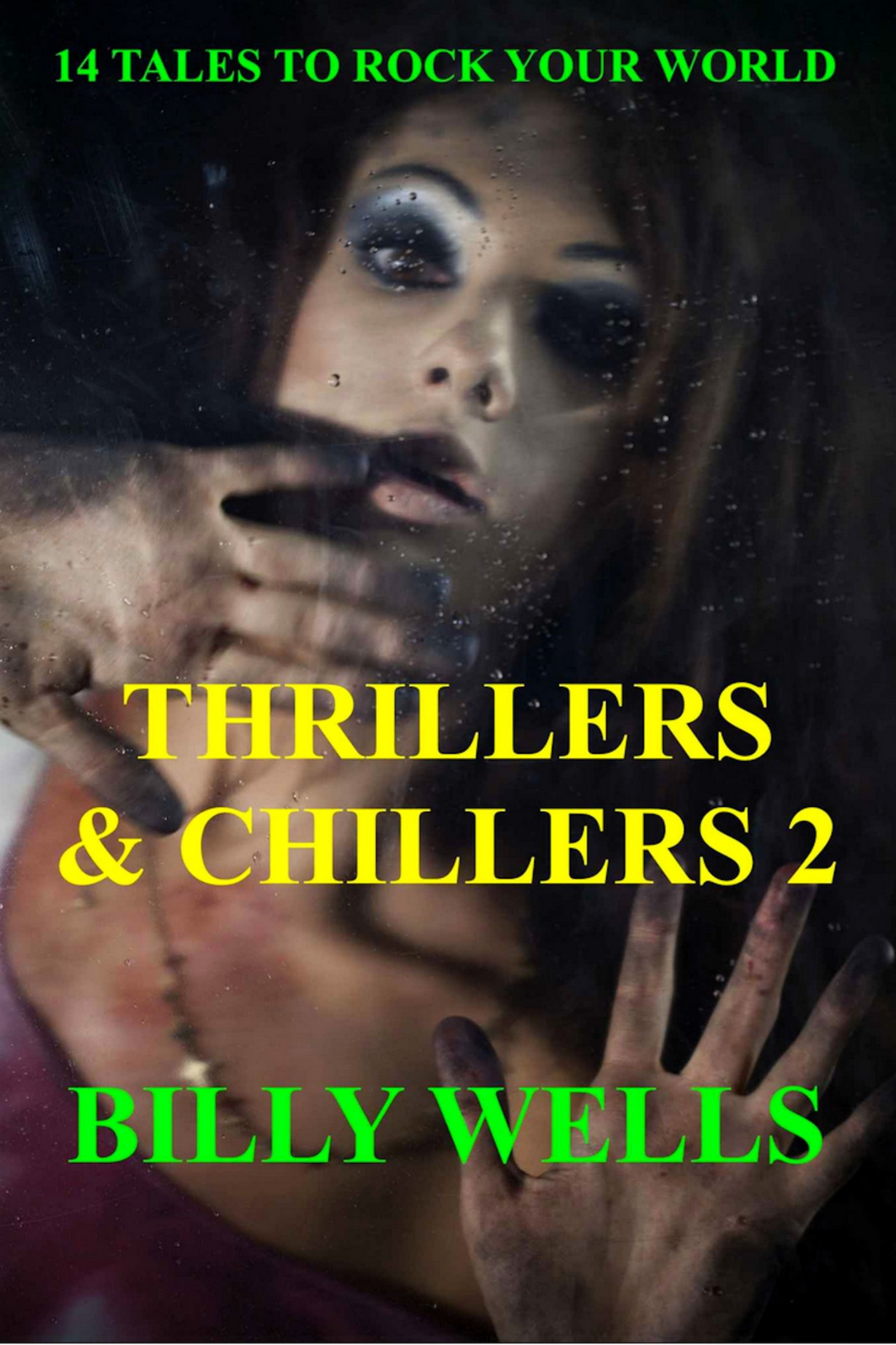
14 TALES TO ROCK YOUR WORLD



THRILLERS & CHILLERS 2

BILLY WELLS

Thrillers & Chillers-
Volume 2:

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The Taxidermist

After bagging a twenty-five-point buck, which was the highlight of his hunting career, Louie Shafer decided he had finally brought down a deer worth mounting. He could already visualize the head and shoulders of the beautiful beast over the fireplace in his cabin in Nashville.

Surprised, he could not find a local taxidermist on the Internet, he dusted off a dog-eared copy of the yellow pages he kept in the garage. Again, he was disappointed to find only a tiny ad for taxidermy services on a page entirely devoted to tax preparation. The shop was located in Sharpsburg, which was a one-stoplight town twenty miles away. He had hoped to request bids from several vendors since he had no idea what he should pay for the mounting. He also wanted to see

examples of the work of various taxidermists to compare the quality. Unfortunately, with only one supplier, a Mr. Osgood Blood, the point was moot.

Looking at the small ad in the bottom corner of the yellow pages, the name “Blood” stuck in his craw like a bitter pill. Did he really want to hire someone with the distasteful surname of “Blood” to mount his most prized treasure from twenty-five years of hunting? He wondered what nationality would have such a frightful name. He had certainly not met anyone with that name before.

He was planning to invite about twenty of his closest friends to his cabin to celebrate his fortieth birthday. He could picture their jaws dropping when they feasted their eyes on the awesome rack above the fireplace. Twenty-five points! None of them had even seen such an animal before, and neither had he. He picked up the phone and called the number.

On the third ring, a weird voice that reminded him of Lurch, the butler from the Adams Family, answered with a deep “Hello, Blood’s Taxidermy.”

“Hello, my name is Louie Shafer. I’d like to ask about having you mount a twenty-five-point buck. I bagged him early this morning and placed the head and shoulders in ice in the back of my pickup as soon as I could. I need your advice on what I should do to preserve the specimen until I can get it to you.”

“Twenty-five points! You don’t see an animal like that very often. How far from my shop are you?” Blood said with an odd accent Louie had never heard before.

“I would guess about twenty miles”

“The sooner you can get the deer to me the better. It’s important to fold the skin inside the carcass in a certain way before it goes into cold storage.”

“It’s a mountain road with a lot of hairpin turns, but I think I can make it there in forty minutes, tops.” Louie replied.

“My shop is behind the petting zoo, which I also own. It’s a long rectangular building on the right side of my home. I’ll be waiting for you.” Louie marveled at how every word Blood spoke resonated in the earpiece.

“But before I make the trip, can you give me an estimate of the cost, and how long the process will take?”

“The price for a head and shoulders mount is $750, and based on my current backlog, I can start on yours in about nine months, so...I’d say I can have it for you by September 1. How does that sound?”

Louie couldn’t believe what he had heard and shot back, “I had no idea it would take that long. I’m having a birthday party for a group of friends June 5, and it’s critical I have it by then. If I pay double your fee, can you put me higher on the list?”

Blood replied with no hesitation, “I’m sorry. I’ve already promised nine other hunters a date on their mounts, and there’s another one standing at the counter right now trying to make up his mind. I’m sorry, but I can’t modify these prior commitments. An alternative might be to offer to pay for one of the mounts already scheduled. I’m pretty sure one of the hunters will wait longer if you pay their fee.”

“Can you recommend someone else for the job?”

Blood hesitated. “I can give you some names, but I can’t say I can recommend any of them. Once you see my work, I am confident you will not want anyone else to work on such a rare animal. Why don’t you bring what you have to my shop? It’s an extremely hot day, and I want to be sure the remains are preserved correctly to insure maximum quality.”

“Okay. I guess I’m sold. I’ll see you in about forty minutes.”

Louie removed three bags of ice from the backup refrigerator in his laundry room and added them to the twenty bags he had purchased at the 7-11. To make sure the carcass didn’t slide around during the trip, he placed two cinder blocks on the corner of the black tarp he used to shield it from the sun.

In forty-one minutes, Louie pulled his pickup into the parking lot of the address he had jotted down from Blood’s ad in the yellow pages. He could not believe the number of cars in the lot. A large sign on a ten-foot high fence read “Pigley Wigley’s Petting Zoo.” There were acres and acres of fenced in areas housing all types of animals. A surprising crowd

appeared to be having the time of their lives. Carnival games and many upscale rides bustled with activity. Gigantic balloons of every color of the rainbow decorated the concourse.

"Granted, this was no *Disneyworld*," Louie thought, "but it was a thriving enterprise."

Looking in all directions, he finally noticed a small sign with an arrow pointing around back that read, "TAXIDERMY SERVICES." The rectangular metal sign was so small, he was almost on top of it before he saw it.

The combination of the two businesses seemed bizarre. Also, Blood had a nine-month backlog of business with little or no advertising. Why would someone with undeniable business savvy not have a web page on the Internet? And, why would the owner of the multimillion-dollar children's park personally waste his time on a rinky-dink taxidermy business? He smiled and decided it takes all kinds of people to make a world.

To add to the puzzlement, when he rounded the bend in the road, his mouth dropped open when he saw a sprawling colonial estate surrounded by palatial gardens. "This couldn't be the place," he thought. Then, Louie saw the long, rectangular building and a sign with the single word "BLOOD'" in the window. The scarlet letters printed on a pure white background in an eerie font suited for a horror movie billboard caused him to remove his sunglasses and sit dumbfounded. "This weirdo, Blood, must have a warped sense of humor to go with his graveyard voice."

Despite his continued apprehension about this place, Louie knew the ice was melting in the bed of his truck, and he had nowhere else to go. He didn't have any trouble finding a parking space in the more than generous lot. His was the other vehicle, so he pulled right up to the front door. Turning off the engine, he climbed out of the truck.

Immediately, a blast of hot air almost buckled his knees as he crossed the sidewalk and approached the entrance to the shop. This had to be a record heat wave for this time of year. The tacky Pepsi Cola thermometer on the wall read "97 DEGREES," and yet, he felt an icy tremor of apprehension creep up his spine as he looked at the darkness behind the

taxidermist's glass entrance. The sky even seemed to cloud over as he approached, and a voice inside himself he had never heard before whispered, "Get the fuck out of here."

When he timidly pushed through the revolving doors, he heard an eerie "bong" somewhere in the back of the store. On the walls behind a long glass display case, the eyes of various animals seemed to follow him as he approached the counter. This made his already nervous stomach heave with an even more disquieting feeling.

The room seemed peculiarly dark for a showroom. Subdued spotlights fixed on each animal provided the only light. Several of the larger displays were so startling; Louie hesitated to turn away for fear the foreboding beast would leap from its perch on the wall upon him. He had seen mounts at the Moose and Elks Lodges, but he had never seen any so realistic it could produce the creepy sensation of beast being alive.

The illuminated display case contained rattlesnakes, tarantulas, and small mounted specimens so real, Louie stood a comfortable distance back from the glass.

"Are you Mr. Shafer?" A deep, bass voice boomed from behind him.

Louie felt as if he had jumped a foot off the ground when the reverberating Lurch-like voice seemed to rattle the windowpanes. Like a phantom from out of nowhere, a giant of a man at least a foot and a half taller than he stood shrouded in the shadows behind the display case.

"Jeepers," Louie said, turning to face the ominous man dressed in black. "I didn't hear you come into the room. I'm sorry, I…" His voice quivered as his eyes fixed on Blood's animalistic face emerging into the light. He thought of running for the door, but couldn't get his legs to move. He stood paralyzed with fear, staring at the monstrosity before him.

The taxidermist's head was much too big for the rest of his body. His face and particularly his enormous ears had ugly patches of stiff bristles that only something like a hedge clipper could remove. He had miniature tusks for his lower incisors that extended in sharp points above his upper lip. Instead of a nose, he had a snout brimming with a yellow

mucous that oozed into his mouthful of jagged, discolored teeth.

Blood broke the prolonged silence with a nervous chuckle and finally said, “I apologize, I forgot to forewarn you about my appearance on the phone. I got distracted and forgot to put on my George Bush mask I wear to meet customers. This always breaks the ice with a laugh. I can’t believe I blundered into the showroom without it.”

Louie’s face reddened with embarrassment as he stammered, “I’m frightfully sorry for my initial reaction in seeing your unfortunate malady. I hope you can forgive me.“

“It’s all right, Mr. Shafer. You are the only customer who has ever seen me this way, and I can imagine how much of a shock it must have been. I am the unfortunate victim of a rare birth defect that very few people have. A wild boar bit my poor mother during her pregnancy, and I ended up with some of its DNA. I hope this does not interfere with our doing business.”

Louie turned his gaze back to the mounts on the wall, and wished to God Blood would put on his mask of George W. Trying to change the subject, he muttered, “From what I’ve seen at the local Moose and Elk Lodges and on the Internet, your work is unbelievable.”

“I hope in a good way,” Blood said with a crooked smile.

“Absolutely, beyond compare.”

“In talking with you on the phone, you struck me as someone who doesn’t have a lot of hunting experience.” Blood said as he surveyed Louie from head to toe with a mental tape measure.

Louie did not understand why he made that assumption, and replied, “That’s actually not the case, Mr. Blood. My father started taking me hunting when I was only ten years old, and I’ve been an avid hunter ever since. I’m simply not versed in the particulars of mounting since I’ve never bagged a deer worthy of putting on display. However, I’m proud to say the buck I shot with my crossbow this morning without any doubt deserves to be a fixture on my rec room wall.”

“So you’ve successfully hunted deer for many years?”

“Absolutely,” Louie beamed. “I hate to brag, but I would estimate I’ve had over fifty kills.”

Blood looked at Louie with an odd expression and continued delving into his history as a hunter, “Do you hunt for food or just for the sport?”

“I hate to admit it, but I detest venison. It gave me the runs the few times my father made me eat some. I have no desire to eat the meat from the animals I kill, I’d much rather have a juicy beefsteak, a Big Mac, or a Whopper. I simply love to set the sights of my crossbow on a wild thing and pull the trigger.”

Blood face turned ashen at this remark and recoiling backwards a step, he said, “I’ve talked with a lot of hunters in my time, but I’ve never heard anyone describe the killing of an animal like that before.”

“The rush I get is almost orgasmic,” Louie ranted, out of control. “To have the power of a living thing’s life or death in your sights is like nothing else I’ve ever experienced. Once in a blue moon, you can’t plan it, when I don’t get off a perfect shot… and I find I have only wounded my prey, I get an extra rush of adrenalin when I feel the warm blood gushing through my fingers after I slit its throat. To feel the intensity of its heartbeat… To see the fear in its eyes… Christ! I’m almost getting a woodie just thinking about it. And then to witness its body shutting down as it breathes its final breath, it’s mind-blowing. It makes you feel like you’re some kind of God.”

Blood’s tusk-like front teeth seemed to quiver as he listened with obvious disdain to Louie’s tirade, but held his tongue, if he had one.

Louie returned from his momentary journey into blissful exhilaration and asked, “Can you help me with the carcass? The sun is blistering hot, and the ice in the pickup is melting.”

“Of course. Let me get a cart,” Blood said as he proceeded through a door behind the display case. A moment later, he returned wheeling a flatbed across the room, and Louie followed him out a side door to the parking lot.

When Louie unlatched the tailgate, he was immediately drenched with a splash of water from the melted ice that accumulated in the truck bed.

Blood expected what was coming and stepped away in time to avoid the ice bath, and said not able to control his

laughter, “I guess that was like diving into a swimming pool on a hot summer day.”

Louie did not find the remark funny, but said nothing. Then, removing the tarp, they lifted the head and shoulders of the deer on to the cart and rolled it inside the shop to a refrigerated room.

When Louie entered the cold storage area, he saw nine rectangular metal tables each with a bloody sheet covering an elongated lump of something underneath.

“I see you’re a man of your word, Mr. Blood. You do have nine mounts scheduled before mine.” Almost immediately, Louie’s wet clothes started to freeze around him as he groaned with teeth chattering, “For God sakes, Blood, what temperature do you keep it in here?”

The taxidermist smiled his weird hog-like smile and replied, “After I apply my special preservatives, I find ten degrees below zero best for storing the bodies for more than six months.”

After they transferred the carcass from the cart on to the metal table and covered it with a sheet, Blood noticed Louie’s wet shoes were sticking to the freezing cement floor. With no warning, he lunged toward Louie and placed a handcuff on his wrist that was attached to a chain tied in to a heavy steel ring on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” Louie screamed as he watched Blood make a beeline for the entrance to the shop. He heard the whoosh of the heavy freezer door closing and saw Blood’s face morph into something not human through the insulated glass panel. He saw his cruel, savage eyes bulging with insane delight.

Louie shrieked at the top of his lungs and twisted at the handcuff like a madman in a futile attempt to escape. The unforgiving, freezing blast of cold air falling from the ceiling engulfed him. In a few minutes, he could feel his whole body stiffening. Ice sickles formed in the snot dangling from his nostrils from his all out struggle to escape the unbearable, biting cold. The blood from his ravaged wrist had partially frozen in a pool at his feet. The thermometer on the wall read ten degrees below zero as he grimaced at the hopelessness

of his situation,

Moving almost in slow motion to the closest table he could reach with the length of chain, Louie raised the frozen bloody sheet draped over something on the table and glared in horror at the head and shoulders of a hunter he had shot the shit with at Maggie's Diner only a few weeks ago.

One of the glass eyes of the mount staring up at him was cockeyed, and the blue lips of the work in progress sported a large artificial red apple clinched between his teeth.

Red Hats Masquerade Ball

Hilda overheard a woman tell another in the swimming pool that the Red Hats were having a masquerade ball for October 31. To attend, the organizers had asked each member to wear a costume with red and purple colors and a mask. They also asked members to bring a gag gift costing no more than ten dollars to exchange at midnight when all the revelers would unmask.

Hilda waded closer to the two obese women and said, testing the waters, “I happened to overhear you talking about the upcoming Red Hats Ball at Lake Osceola Recreation Center. I was in the Red Hats Club in New Jersey for more than ten years before I moved to Florida. Is the party is open to all Red Hats nationally or only local women?”

“I'm sure you're welcome to come if you like. I'll give you

the address to send your check for the dinner, which will be twenty dollars per person."

"How many people usually attend this type of function?" Hilda asked innocently.

"Oh, I'd say about a hundred women will sign up for Halloween. That's what we had last year."

After sunbathing and reading for an hour, Hilda gathered her belongings. On her way out, she stopped to get the address to buy the ticket from the woman. She would arrange to pay cash under a false identity.

Hilda could barely control her excitement when she reached her golf cart. She had recently relocated to Florida after living with her late husband in an over 55 adult community in New Jersey for twenty years. She had lied about being a Red Hat. She loathed these types of activities and avoided them like anchovies on a pizza.

She'd already joined a bowling league and several bridge groups, but so far, as a single woman, no one had invited her to any functions in the neighborhood. In time, she would join some social clubs and get on some mailing lists. She needed more people she could wreak havoc on. The Red Hats Masquerade Ball was the perfect occasion to attend a party anonymously since she'd be wearing a full-face Halloween mask. She would make a brief appearance, plant the gift on the assigned table, and disappear into the night without anyone remembering she was there.

She would begin immediately in concocting a booby trap that would likely disfigure upwards of one hundred women. And, it was only three weeks way. This stroke of luck would allow her to enjoy her favorite pastime far sooner than she had anticipated. She felt an orgasmic tremor in her loins just thinking about it.

On the way home in her golf cart, she stopped at the community mailbox to mail three small boxes to random addresses in the neighborhood. It was amazing what you could order from medical laboratories under the guise of a research facility. Hilda had first learned of this godsend while reading a novel by Robin Cook. As soon as she read the passage, she rented a P.O. box her hubby never knew about

to receive the various hermetically sealed packets of diseases she ordered from the Internet.

Now, ten years later, she was still using the U.S. Snail to send bugs to people far enough away to avoid any threat to herself. She rarely targeted anyone specific; all of the people she infected were randomly chosen. Only once had she read of someone's death that she was sure she had caused. In her small way, her frequent mailings supported the failing postal service, which was a good thing. Unlike her, most people rarely mailed anything anymore. The boxes she placed in the mailbox on this occasion contained a particularly nasty strain of smallpox.

She had worked in a medical research facility as a young woman and knew how to handle contagious specimens. She had also spent a considerable amount of money converting a secret rental unit near the interstate into a laboratory complete with a decontamination area with insulated suits.

Next, she planned to mail happy-faced miniature dolls laced with nasty nodules of bacteria. These nasty little gifts probably not kill the people who opened them unless they had medical issues already. Nevertheless, they would definitely make them sick. Another insidious plus was the recipient's home would need a complete cleansing just as it would with asbestos or mold contamination, which would be quite costly. If a random victim's grandchild happened to be visiting when they opened the box, this could lead to devastating health consequences for their entire lives. "Life's a bitch," she thought, "and then, you die."

Hilda had plenty of time to make the surprise package for the masquerade ball, but she couldn't wait to get started. She had agonized over this creation for years. Now that Fred, her husband, had passed and her son had a family and a life of his own back in Jersey, it was time to let her creative juices flow.

She had found a blueprint for the diabolical device in a novel written by a soldier who disarmed booby-traps in the dark to enable his own forces to penetrate German bunkers during World War II.

Hilda loved surfing the Internet for new ideas to make other people's lives a living hell. After a satisfying salad for lunch, she went to Home Depot to purchase most of the items she would need for the device. The explosive components were the most difficult to acquire without being traced, but after greasing several palms the week before and almost being raped by a scar-faced pervert in a shabby section of Orlando, she secured the necessary materials.

Now that she was alone with no one to distract her, she could supplement her daily routine of pickle ball and golf with building booby traps in addition to her mailings.

Two weeks before the party, an old geezer cut her off in his golf car and almost caused a serious accident. The unpleasant encounter infuriated her, and after smiling as if nothing had happened, Hilda followed the reprobate home. The next day, she left a present for him in his mailbox. The snippet about the explosion in the Daily Chronicle the next morning was an unexpected delight. Apparently, the old fart had lost an eye and several fingers from the blast.

As the date of the Red Hat party grew closer, Hilda felt as giddy as a young girl getting ready for her first date as she imagined what would happen when the unsuspecting victim opened her surprise.

The only possible glitch in executing her plan was the weight of the package. Hilda worried that someone might be suspicious at how heavy this gift costing no more than ten dollars was compared to the others. She hoped when they lifted the small square package from the table, they might think it was a paperweight. Paperweights were heavy, but normally inexpensive.

It was unfortunate that the nails required to inflict the most damage had to be somewhat heavy. There were lighter alternatives, but according to the specifications of the device, a certain mass was necessary for each projectile to puncture the skin and lodge deeply enough into the eye to inflict the maximum, irrevocable damage. The instructions were very specific on this point, and so, Hilda followed each detail to the letter.

On the morning of the long-awaited Red Hat event, Hilda

received an email from Bradley, her son, informing her the family would stop for a visit on November 4. This was next Wednesday, four days after the party.

Since the rental unit housed all of the suspicious equipment and supplies she used for her booby traps and communicable diseases, Hilda had little to do to her villa to prepare for Bradley's visit. The storage building she rented was perfect, and she never received any mail concerning it since she paid cash in advance.

Hilda was disappointed the family reunion was so close to the party, but she couldn't wait to see her precious granddaughter, Penny. Seeing Madeleine, Bradley's wife, was a different story, but the women her son had dated before he married her were ten times more annoying. Madeline was a wonderful mother and homemaker, and she made more money than Bradley. She also had very ample breasts for him to play with. Her son had always gravitated to women with large breasts.

Hilda adored little Penny who looked a lot like her when she was a little girl. In fact, Hilda had pictures her father took with his Brownie camera that looked identical to Penny's pictures when the little angel was six years old. She knew she'd better enjoy her granddaughter now while she was little, because when she became a teenager, she'd never want to come to visit her old granny.

That afternoon, Hilda went to the shopping center and bought a very expensive Barbie doll, a cute little pink dress, and some wrapping paper and ribbons. She couldn't wait to see Penny's face light up when she saw the beautiful, but pricey doll.

When she returned home, she placed the two presents for Penny on the dining room table in a beautiful shopping bag adorned with images of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. She used the pink and purple paper she bought at Macy's and a great big red bow to wrap the surprise package for the Red Hat Masquerade Ball. Hilda was sure her package would be one of the first ones selected; it was stunning and beautifully wrapped.

She was still worried about the weight, but there was

nothing she could do about it. Going to the mall had taken more time than she thought, and she knew it would take about an hour to dress for the masquerade ball. Once it was on, no one would ever be able to identify her afterward. She was a master of disguise. It was critical that she not talk with any of the members in her normal voice.

Since Hilda had already checked the parking lot and the security cameras, she knew just where to park and where to walk to avoid being filmed as much as possible.

She wished she could record a video of the explosion, but she would be long gone by midnight.

The package about the size of a small box of Tide would detonate as soon as the top was removed like a jack in the box. It would send out hundreds of small nails and shards of glass that would pepper everyone around it.

She remembered the subdued carpet at Lake Osceola that would soon be soaked with blood. She imagined most of the members would lose one and possibly both eyes. This was without a doubt the most diabolical bloodletting she had ever conceived. It would certainly produce headlines on a national level, and possibly around the world.

She couldn't believe no one else had tried this before. After all, anyone with a subscription to *Popular Mechanics* could have constructed the device by following simple directions.

She thought of all the wasted years when her obsession to inflict pain was put on hold while raising a family. The twenty-year inactivity had been maddening, but faced with the same alternatives again; she knew she would do everything the same. Bradley, her loving son, and Penny, her precious granddaughter, were more than worth any sacrifice she had made.

Suddenly, Hilda felt a sharp pain in her left arm. It felt like someone had stabbed her with an ice pick just above the elbow. The intensity of the pressure was so strong she could hardly catch her breath. Was she having a heart attack? What a disastrous stroke of bad luck to have a heart attack on the very day she had planned to make history. She could see her name on the marquee of life with names like Dahmer,

Manson, and Ted Bundy. Hell, Jack the Ripper only killed five women for sure, and probably no more than eleven at most.

"Oh, well," she thought, "there would be other parties." She rose from her chair and attempted to reach the phone in the kitchen, only a few feet away. She hoped she would still be able to function and not be totally debilitated if she was having a stroke.

As she reached for the wall to keep from falling, she thought about the bottle of aspirin in the kitchen cabinet above the phone. She would bite into a few pills after she called 9-1-1; sometimes, aspirin could prevent an oncoming heart attack.

Releasing her grip from the doorway to stretch for the phone, an even sharper pain in the center of her chest paralyzed her and sent her sprawling to the ceramic tile. Her head hit the front of the dishwasher on the way down. Her nose flattened with a thud on the floor, and one arm bent at an odd angle behind her back.

As she laid there, a catatonic lump, locked in one continuous excruciating pang of sheer agony, she could feel her mind shutting down. Tiny stars pulsated in the consuming blackness behind her eyes. "No!" she screamed silently inside herself, "don't let me die like this! Please, God, cripple me, let me suffer in eternal damnation, but don't let me die with the package on the dining room table."

* * *

When Bradley saw several days of the *Daily Chronicle* in the driveway when he drove up to the house with his family on Wednesday, he feared the worst. His voice quaked with emotion as he opened the car door, "I've got a bad feeling something is wrong. You and Penny wait here while I take a look."

Bradley went to the front door and rang the doorbell. There was no response. After getting the same message several times on the answering machine, he found the spare key under the flowerpot, unlocked the door, and went in.

Immediately, Bradley detected the sweet, overpowering stench of death in the closed space. Someone had once described the smell as rotten meat laced with cheap perfume. Only a few steps inside, he caught a glimpse of his mother on

the kitchen floor. Her face had turned a purple color, and there was a small pool of dried blood circling her head. He surmised she had hit her head on the ceramic tile floor.

Madeline pushed open the front door called out, “Bradley, is she all right?”

“No, dear,” he said, starting to sob, “Mother has gone to heaven.”

* * *

Five days later, Bradley, Madeleine, and Penny returned to the house after the funeral and a small luncheon for the people who attended from the adult community in New Jersey. They planned to return to Paramus the next morning.

Bradley had contacted a realtor to sell his mother’s home as quickly as possible. They would return later to go through his mother’s personal items and decide what they wanted to keep. They would discard the rest or donate it to Goodwill. Madeline wanted a few pieces of the jewelry, and they had always adored the large picture hanging over the sofa in the living room.

Penny had loved the beautiful dolly and the pink dress they found in the shopping bag on the dining room table, but her parents had made her wait until now to open the wrapped package lying next to it. They thought it must be a very special gift since grandma had wrapped it so beautifully in pink and purple ribbons with a big red bow

Madeline hefted the present and shook it. “Gee, Bradley, what could this be? It’s so heavy for its size.”

“I'm clueless,” Bradley replied, “but whatever it is, I'm sure it will have a special meaning to Penny since it will be the last gift her grandma gave her.

Penny looked at her mother in frustration as Madeleine removed the red bow and cut the ribbons with a pair of scissors. “Mommy! Let me open it,” Penny whined, jumping up and down with anticipation.

The Ice Man

The telephone rang, and seeing it was Audrey from the bridge club on the caller ID, Emily answered with a cheerful hello.

“Emily, I hope it's not too late to call, but there’s something I think you should know.”

Audrey's voice trailed off, and Emily thought she might have lost the connection, “Audrey, are you still there?”

“Yes, I'm still here. I know it's hard to believe knowing me, but I'm at a loss for words. I think I jumped the gun when I called. I picked up the phone and punched in the number, and now I don't know how to put the words together I want to tell

you."

"Gee, Audrey, I've heard of calls like this, but never received one. This sounds like you know a secret I should know, but you can't tell me."

"I suddenly realized that after playing cards with you for five years, I really don't know very much about you other than the way you bid and the way you play your hand. Maybe you're the kind of person who wouldn't want to know what I was going to tell you."

"Audrey, stop with this bullshit. Tell me why you called, or I'll come over to your house and ring the doorbell until I drive you insane. It sounds like this secret is heart attack serious. You're scaring me. It can't be that bad, can it?"

The line was silent for an embarrassing period of time, and then a timid voice an octave higher than before said, "If I tell you, you've got to promise me you'll never tell anyone I told you."

"Christ, Audrey. Cross my heart and hope to die with sugar on it. *Dexter* is coming on in two minutes, what is it?"

"Is Chuck there with you?"

"No, he's in Chicago for the week. I'm supposed to pick him up at the airport tomorrow night."

"That's what I thought you said at bridge last night. Well, damn the torpedoes, here goes…." After a beat, she muttered, "On second thought, I can't tell you on the phone. Why don't you catch *Dexter* on demand and meet me at the American Grill. I think you're going to need a drink when you hear what I have to say."

"You sure have raised the bar on my curiosity. Okay, I'll meet you there in twenty minutes, and you'd better not chicken out."

When Emily entered the restaurant, she saw Audrey and Angelo, her boyfriend, in a booth at the rear of the restaurant and joined them. She took a seat across from Audrey and said, "I'm surprised to see you, Angelo. What are you doing here?"

"I think we should keep our voices low," he whispered.

Emily looked around and found no one seated near them, and turning back to face them said, "The suspense is

killing me."

Audrey took Emily's hand, and with a concerned expression, she began, "Angelo went to a bachelor party last night at GoGo's Titty Bar in Livingston. He saw your husband there with a group of very tough men in black suits. He recognized one of them as a mafia hit man he went to high school with."

Emily looked at her and smiled broadly, "You brought me down here for this? What's the joke?"

Audrey didn't reciprocate with a smile, but simply said, "I'm sorry, Emily, but I've never been more serious in my life."

"This is crazy. I can't believe you could really tell me this with a straight face. Like I said, Chuck is in Chicago at some business meeting." Looking more intently at Angelo, Emily asked, "How do you know my husband anyway?"

"Remember the victory party we were both invited to after Obama won? We sat together, and I spoke with your husband, Chuck, for over an hour that night."

The server came to the table and took their order for three gin martinis straight up with olives.

Angelo continued, "While we were talking, Chuck told me he worked for a company named Black World International. Since I never heard of them, I asked what they did. After he gave me the age-old line that if he told me what they did, he would have to kill me; he just said they were a top-secret intelligence contractor, and he couldn't say anymore than that. We laughed and had some more drinks. I couldn't believe it when I saw him with Rubber Fingers Basilico last night."

"Rubber Fingers?" Emily remarked.

"That's the nickname we gave him in elementary school. He's double-jointed and could bend his fingers backwards further than anyone in the school."

"I know you have no reason to lie, so you must have my husband confused with someone else. Chuck and I have been married for almost twenty years. He's the kindest man I've ever known and such a good father. He never missed one soccer game or piano recital our daughter ever had. He goes to mass every Sunday when he's in town; and as far as I

know, he's never even had a parking ticket."

"That's all fine and good," Angelo said, sitting back in his chair as the server placed three biscuits and three martinis on the table and scurried off. "But what do you know about Black World International?"

"Chuck said everything he does involves national security, and a stipulation of his employment is never to disclose any confidential information to anyone. Even me. He told me that on the night he proposed, and he made me promise to never pry into his business affairs. He indicated there was an element of danger in his work, and it was critical that his family live their lives below the radar. I made that promise then, and I've never broken it."

"Don't you see, this fits right in with his secret life with the mob," Angelo shot back. "Have you ever heard anyone call him the Iceman?"

"Oh that." Emily replied, chewing on a fingernail. "A number of his friends from high school call him that. I asked him about it once, and he said he got the nickname from his special ability to hit a home run for the team when they needed it most. He wasn't normally a great hitter, but he was like that Yankee player years ago they called Mr. October."

"Reggie Jackson?" Angelo's face lit up.

"Yes, that's the guy. Like him, he had ice water running through his veins when the chips were down. He hit an inordinate amount of homers in the clutch during the post season."

"I'm sorry Mrs.…."

"Call me Emily."

"Emily, I suspect he made that up. The Iceman is the name the police gave the most heartless mafia hit man in history. The grapevine says what he did to his victims before he killed them defies the imagination in terms of brutality and sadism."

Emily's eyes widened in bewilderment, trying to get her mind around what Angelo was telling her about her husband and the father of their precious daughter.

"My husband would never do anything like what you are describing. I don't know who or what you saw or think you

saw, but we should drop this. It's getting us nowhere. I can still catch *Dexter* on the tube before I turn in."

"I know what Angelo is telling you is unbelievable, and I must be insane to take a chance on coming here," Audrey said nervously. "Angelo begged me not to get involved in your problems, but when I heard the prostitute your husband left with last night was found dead in an alley this morning, I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. I just couldn't bear to think my favorite bridge partner was living with a homicidal maniac whose trademark is snipping off his victims fingers and toes and eating them like buffalo wings dipped in A1 sauce."

Emily's hand shot to her mouth at the thought, and fumbling for her napkin, she knocked over her untouched martini.

Audrey withdrew a folded section of the morning paper from her coat pocket and opened it on the table. "The headline read "GO-GO DANCER FOUND DECAPITATED IN IRONBOUND SECTION OF NEWARK."

Emily looked into Angelo's dark eyes and shaking her head in hopes he would change his story the second time around, she pleaded, "You're sure you saw my husband leave with this woman last night? You weren't drunk at the time, and there's not a shred of doubt in your mind?"

"I'm sorry, Emily," Angelo said apologetically, "there's no mistake. I was no more than ten feet away. The girl was on something. She must have had way too much booze or drugs. She was so wasted, your husband and Rubber Fingers had to carry her out the front door."

Emily sat with her mouth agape as she looked at the two of them in disbelief. "This nightmare couldn't be happening," she thought. Chuck was the only man she'd ever loved, and the only man she'd ever had sex with. He'd been so kind and so considerate of her feelings all through the years. How could he be cheating on her with some hooker from Newark?"

Audrey pushed the news clipping across the table in front of Emily, "Didn't you see this write-up about the headless go-go dancer someone found in the alley in Newark? You still read the paper every morning, don't you…when you're having

your coffee?”

Emily focused on the headline and after skimming the fine print said, “Yes, I saw it, but I didn't read the details. It didn’t strike me as special that a prostitute had been found dead in Newark.”

“That was the girl your husband left the strip joint with. The newspaper article couldn’t go into the gory details but it says the M.O. of the brutal murder suggests it was the work of a sadistic killer the authorities have named the Ice Man.”

Emily's face turned ashen, and her hands started to shake, “I can't believe this. My husband is like a saint.”

Angelo took her hand and looked into her teary eyes, “I'm sorry, Emily, Chuck is definitely not a saint, far from it. Enter ‘Iceman’ in Google and you'll read about one of the most notorious killers in American history and the awful things he did to the people he murdered. He's a monster without a shred of feeling or remorse for his victims. That's how he got his nickname; it was nothing about baseball.”

“If my husband is such a monster, why are you risking your lives telling me about it?”

Audrey and Angelo looked at each other oddly, and Audrey replied, ”As I said before, Angelo begged me not to tell you, but I really care about you after all these years. I know your daughter and she’s adorable, and I know how kind and considerate you are. I'm really afraid for you. I agree, we took a chance coming here tonight, and based on who your husband is, our lives are in your hands. Maybe I’m crazy, but I think I know you well enough to believe you wouldn’t, pardon the expression ‘fuck us’ after we tried to help you.”

Emily took Audrey’s hand and said, “You’ve been a dear friend for sure, and I know you’re sincerely trying to help me, but at the same time, what your telling me is so beyond belief.”

“Look, Emily, what we’ve told you is between us. We’re not planning on telling anyone else. It’s up to you what you do with the information. All I can say is if you stay with him, I can't believe there will be a happy ending.”

“You’re not going to the police?” Emily asked, looking from Audrey to Angelo.

Audrey looked around at the empty tables in their section and said, “We’re not stupid enough to go to the police. We don't have any hard evidence. We might cause your husband a lot of trouble if we tell the cops he left with the murdered woman, but I don’t want to think about what he would do to us if he got off.”

“Everything you’ve told me seems to fit together, but I need to think this over before I do anything rash.”

“We understand. Who do you believe a bridge partner or your husband? Do you have any money you can get your hands on if you need to move out quickly?”

“I guess I could write a check for a few thousand from our checking account, but I've never done it before. As far as our stocks and bonds, I don't have a clue. Chuck takes care of all of that.”

“Well, Emily, go home and check it out. You have a lot of thinking to do. Don't blame Angelo; I'm the one who had to tell you. I'm sorry. I really am. I'll pick up the check; it's the least I can do after ruining your life.”

Emily smiled weakly and rose from the table. She hadn't had even a sip of her martini, but she seemed unsteady on her feet.

“Are you okay to drive?” Audrey asked, with a worried look. “Do you want me to take you home? Angelo can drive your car.”

“No, I won't be all right, but I can drive. Thanks.”

Emily left the restaurant, leaving Audrey and Angelo at the table.

“Well, it worked like a charm. I think we're $25,000 richer,” Angelo beamed. “I can't believe you were able to take a few things you found out playing bridge and create a scenario that Chuck is a serial killer.”

“You know it was much easier than I thought. Chuck has that crazy Secret Service job, and he can't tell Emily anything about it. Therefore, he could work for the Mafia. His job puts him on the road often, allowing him to have a secret life. He is a model husband and father, which would dispel any idea he could be into something bad, so Emily has never had a reason to doubt him or ever check up on him. This was the

perfect scenario."

Angelo's smile covered his whole face as Audrey continued reminiscing, "When I saw that the *Ledger* said the authorities thought the notorious Ice Man had murdered the prostitute in Newark, I remembered Chuck's nickname from baseball, and tied in the hit man angle. I knew Emily read the newspaper every morning before going to work, and I didn't think she would miss such a horrific headline."

"Unbelievable!" Angelo shouted with approval as dollars signs filled his mind's eye.

"The last piece was connecting the prostitute to Chuck leaving the club. Saying Angelo recognized him at the Titty Bar made the whole story tie together with a neat bow."

"Pure genius!" Angelo said, beaming with pride at Audrey's uncanny ability to fabricate something plausible from a series of unrelated facts,

"I must say," Audrey agreed, "there was one point the story seemed so real, I almost started to believe it myself."

"It was pretty dark in here. I hope the cameras picked up everything," Angelo said, removing the hidden microphone tucked inside his shirt.

The server came over and said, "How did I do? I don't have much experience carrying martinis on a tray. I think I spilled half of them on the way to the table."

"You were almost perfect," Audrey replied, Emily was too upset to notice anything you did. We didn't even drink the martinis you served. You were a tad slow on cleaning up the drink Emily spilled, but I think it went better than I ever dreamed possible."

Audrey spoke louder into her hidden mike, "Well, am I right, Harry? Tell me you got it all."

A voice in her earpiece said, "We got it all. I think this will be the best show ever on *Believe It Or Not*. You deserve the prize. You may even have a shot at the hundred thousand dollar super prize money."

"What now?" Angelo asked, almost floating on air with excitement.

"We are supposed to head over to Emily's house for the celebration and the reveal."

“The reveal?” Angelo replied, looking puzzled.

“Yes, you know…” Audrey explained, “When they tell her we fooled her, and it was just a segment for the *Believe It Or Not* TV show. I understand that all of her neighbors, her associates from work, and her immediate friends will be at her house when they pop open the champagne.”

“What about Chuck? Will he be there, too?”

“No. He won't be there in person; Barney, the producer, said he’s still in Chicago at an important business meeting. As of the time we made the initial call to Emily, he hadn't been able to reach him. All his calls have been forwarding to voice mail, but they are hoping to patch him in on a live video connection at the house.”

After a few more high fives, the camera crew began packing up their equipment. Audrey and Angelo left the restaurant laughing loudly and headed toward their car in the deserted parking lot. Both of them were beaming with accomplishment and the anticipation of receiving their $25,000 prize money.

“What's the first thing you're going to buy when we get the check?” Angelo asked.

“I've always wanted to go to Europe, but I've never had the money. What about you?”

I always wanted the 1956 Mickey Mantle Tops baseball card in mint condition to complete my collection.”

Just before reaching their Toyota, Emily stepped from the shadows of a large shrub and barked, “I can't believe you motherfuckers figured out my husband is the Iceman.”

Audrey and Angelo stood with their mouths agape, staring into the barrel of a big black gun with a long silencer.

“What you didn't figure out is that I taught Chuck everything he knows.”

Emily placed a neat hole in the middle of each of their foreheads with two barely audible, precision shots that sent both of them toppling backwards to the asphalt. She felt a warm mist of blood on her face as she peered down at her dear bridge partner and Angelo lying in a heap with a stew of brains and gore decorating the back end of their Camry. She surveyed the parking lot and noted two white vans with TV

lettering parked in front of the entrance. Opening her car door and getting in, she drove into the street and headed for home.

She couldn't wait to tell Chuck how her bridge partner had made him after he had fooled the police for so many years. She was also going to ask him about being in the Newark strip club instead of Chicago.

When Emily pulled into the driveway of her house at 11:30 p.m., she noticed the light in the living room that was controlled by a timer was not on. She guessed the bulb must've burned out.

Unlocking the door, she stepped inside, and immediately, flashbulbs and spotlights blinded her. She wondered how much blood splatter peppered her clothes and her face as the TV cameras rolled into view. Across the room on a gigantic monitor, she saw Chuck’s bewildered expression as someone handed her a champagne glass, and a houseful of familiar faces shouted “surprise” in unison and started pouring the bubbly for a toast.

Footprints in the Snow

Jeremy White frowned at the annoying task that lay before him of shoveling his sidewalk and driveway. He was fifty-seven years old, and snow removal was not on his list of favorite things to do.

It snowed about a foot after he went to bed, and the weatherman said the temperature would plummet into the teens by the afternoon. He wanted to complete the shoveling before it got icy.

He put on his overcoat, boots, gloves, and hat, and looking like someone on his way to the North Pole, he went to the garage and grabbed the dreaded snow shovel.

When he opened the garage door, he winced when he saw the snow had drifted into a huge pile on that side of the house. More than two feet had accumulated in his driveway, at least a foot more than the actual snowfall reported by the

weatherman.

And so he began, and in no time, he was huffing and puffing. White was totally out of shape and tipped the scales at a blubbery 250 pounds. Every time he picked up a shovelful of snow, he regretted not hiring Bob Smith's son, Billy, to do the job. The little weasel shoveled all the driveways in the neighborhood except for his. For God sakes, he was a marketing analyst at Wallyworld. Why did he shovel his own snow? He didn't do windows. Was it the money or was it because he could not stand that sneaky, red-haired, freckled face twerp? He suspected Billy as the one who soaped his windows and toilet papered his trees and shrubs on Halloween. He also suspected he'd battered his mailbox and put weed killer on his prized azaleas.

About halfway down the driveway, he paused to catch his breath and surveyed the front yard. It was like an untouched winter wonderland except… His mouth dropped open when he noticed footprints leading from his front door around the left side of his house.

"What the hell," he muttered, "this didn't make any sense. He hadn't gone out the front door that morning. How could there be footsteps? Had someone broken into his house during the night? He hadn't noticed anything peculiar when he came down for breakfast.

He jammed the shovel into a snow pile and slogged across the lawn to the sidewalk. Sure enough. There they were. Footprints leading from the front porch to the back of the house. The scary part was there were no footprints coming to the porch, only going. Someone from inside the house must have made them.

White placed his right foot into one of the prints and discovered the intruder had a shoe size much smaller than his own. Immediately, his face turned red with rage as he pictured Billy Smith sneaking around his property like a thief in the night.

He felt a sudden puff of wind on his cheek, and saw a few new flakes falling to the ground. He hoped they had come off a nearby tree, but no, it was actually snowing again. His first thought was to search the house to see what was

missing, but now he decided it was more important to see where the footprints led. He didn't want the new snow to cover the tracks. Blind with fury, he really wanted to nail Billy Smith this time.

Quickly, he raced around the corner of the house into the backyard. Following the path that led into the woods bordering the development, he felt like a modern-day Sherlock Holmes, and the prey was afoot as Conan Doyle used to say.

The skeletons of barren trees stood like sentries in the woods behind his house. The area was much bigger than he thought, but the tracks were easy to follow since they stayed on a path the neighbors had apparently created over many years. After a short walk, the trees thinned out, and he found himself at the edge of a large clearing.

What was this place that had no trees and foliage? Was this an old baseball field or part of a farm from long ago? He lived nearby, but since he had just moved in nine months before and spent much of his time on the road, he wasn't familiar with this parcel of land.

The snow fell harder now, and the footprints had become less distinct than before. He quickened his pace.

Suddenly, he heard a loud crack under his feet and just up ahead; he saw a dark discoloration in the snow where the footprints veered sharply to the left. Immediately, he understood what this place without trees really was. In his haste to catch the redheaded weasel, he had wandered out upon the ice of a small lake covered over by the snow.

Mortal fear swept over him as he realized the ice where he stood was not frozen solid. Tossed on the ground beside him lay a bag of salt exactly like the brand he used to melt the ice on his sidewalk. On the discolored section surrounding him, he saw handfuls of white particles spread across the path he had followed and beyond. Someone had purposely scattered most of a bag of salt right where the footprints had led him. The annoying smirk of Billy Smith rocketed into his thoughts as he looked up and peered across the expanse of the lake. In the distance, he saw a diminutive figure watching him from the tree line a few hundred feet away,

White's whole body began to shake with unbridled fear

as he inched slowly backwards like a man walking on eggshells. The insidious little bastard had obviously used the key he'd hidden under a rock to unlock the side door and sneak into his house during the night while the snow was still coming down in sheets. The creep knew the footprints leading away from the house would lead him into his trap on the ice, and even carried off the bag of salt he'd just purchased at Home Depot. How could he have been so stupid not to realize this was a body of water, not a farm or athletic field?

White couldn't see the cracks forming beneath him as he tiptoed like an obese ballet dancer ever closer to safety. With each step, the ominous squeaking of the ice splintering below grated on his raw nerves like fingernails on a blackboard. He wanted to cry out, but dared not put any added pressure on the ice such an action would demand. Billy Smith wanted him dead for some ridiculous reason, and White knew he wouldn't lift a finger to help him.

Suddenly, the path darkened as a huge section of snow sagged below the surface. Incapable of enduring the suspense any longer, White bolted for solid ground. His gallant feat of deception to get a jump on the ice before it broke apart was short-lived. In the flash of an eye, he fell headlong into the freezing, breath-sucking water. His arms flailed for purchase as every pore of his body cried out for mercy from the biting agony of the unbearable ice bath.

He screamed, and the water swept into his mouth. His head went further under, and in seconds, he thought his lungs would burst. As he struggled for breath and groped for something to grab hold of that could save him, he wondered if he would be nominated for this year's Darwin award for his stupidity.

In a matter of seconds, he couldn't fight the inevitable any longer. He simply gave up and let the Grim Reaper take him, hoping he would get his hands on Billy Smith if they met in the afterlife.

After the momentary outburst of White's futile attempt to save himself, a deathly stillness fell over the lake, and the snow began to fall harder.

In the distance, Billy Smith beamed with

accomplishment. His nemesis, Mr. White had taken the bait completely, just as he thought he would. It had taken a lot of courage for him to use the spare key and sneak into his house in the dark. He couldn't believe his good fortune when his flashlight beam fell upon the bag of salt pellets in the laundry room. He figured the fat fuck would fall through the ice anyway since he probably weighed three times as much as he did, but the salt would put the final nail in his icy coffin. He prided himself for the patience it took to sit in the garage all night worrying he might be discovered, and then leaving by the front door before the old geezer came down for breakfast. His heart had been beating like a jackhammer the whole time.

Billy didn't feel the slightest bit of remorse. For some reason, White had despised him from day one, and he felt the same about him. Not only had he not hired him to shovel his driveway and cut his grass, he tried to blackball him with the other neighbors. He suspected, but couldn't prove, he was the one who punctured the basketball he left on the playground not far from his house. White was also the only one who complained about the noise he and his friends made when they played basketball until sundown during the summer. For criminy sake, if he didn't like to hear kids playing, he should not have bought a house next to the schoolyard.

Billy pulled his coat up around his face and started walking toward home. He continued recounting all the reasons he 'd set the trap for White on the ice. The miserable son of a bitch was so tight; he wouldn't close his windows and turn on the air conditioning so he wouldn't hear them dribbling up and down the court. Jeepers! How did he expect them to play without bouncing the ball? And how about the time he called his parents and accused him of battering his mailbox with a baseball bat last summer. Sure, he was in the car, but Skipper Norman had done the deed. He was also with his buddies when they peppered White's shrubs and soaped his windows on Halloween. His friends never knew it, but he had never lifted a finger against the old fart. He didn't know why, he just didn't.

He had despised Mr. White for so many reasons, but the crowning blow, the reason he could not let him live was when

Corky, his precious little cocker spaniel went missing. He and his parents had put signs on every post in the neighborhood and the bulletin boards of every convenience store, and not one person had come forward with any information. Corky had disappeared from the face of the earth five days ago. It was a mystery until yesterday morning when he saw Mr. White tip his hat, and smile his crooked smile as he went by in his Volvo. He had never done that before. Billy knew then, he had taken poor Corky, and he was flaunting it.

Now, the only thing he knew for sure was starting today the world would be a better place without Mr. White. Billy doubted anyone would shed a tear for the miserable, old Scrooge.

As he reached the halfway point home, he thought of what he would say if his parents discovered he hadn't slept in his bed last night. He checked his phone for messages and found he didn't have any. His parents usually got up late on Saturday so if he hurried, they may not even know he was gone. If they did check his room, he would just say Benny was sick, and he 'd helped him deliver papers that morning. This excuse always worked.

Suddenly, on the path in front of him, he saw a grisly pile of bones and guts. Apparently, A large predator had ripped apart and mostly devoured a smaller animal. Turning away in disgust, he tried to think of what animal in the neighborhood could have done such a savage deed. Then, his eyes fell upon the familiar green dog tag Corky had worn around his neck laying among the sickening stew of remains.

A tremor of guilt struck him like lightning as the realization that White had not been responsible for Corky's disappearance after all. He had been too quick to be his judge, jury, and executioner. The loss of Corky had pushed him over the edge. He stood there wondering how their hatred for each other had driven him to this.

Billy thought back on all the other things that had caused him to set the trap for White. The punctured basketball, the flat tires on his bike, the incessant whining to his parents.

It was painful to consider the possibility that White may not have been responsible for any of these things, the same

as he had not been responsible for Corky's disappearance. A frown of deepest sorrow and guilt replaced the wide grin that had lit up his freckled face only moments ago in celebration of his perfect crime. Deep shadows of uncertainty brought bitter tears to his eyes.

Behind him, Billy heard an ominous growl that froze him with fear. Turning, he saw the bloody, bared teeth of Mr. Foster's enormous white wolfhound foaming at the mouth with ravenous, hungry eyes.

"Nice doggie," Billy whimpered, just before the rabid hound tore out his throat.

The Makeover

The miserable excuse for a human being stood at the reception desk in a designer dress and an obscenely expensive diamond necklace. Two bodyguards who looked like lineman from the NFL inspected the people in the waiting room coldly. Everyone including the bodyguards winced as the female ogre barked at the young receptionist, “Do you know who I am?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm afraid I don't. Do you have an appointment?”

“Of course, I have an appointment. I'm here to see Dr. Best for my annual makeover and this time for a nose

augmentation."

"Ah, Mrs. Crabtree," the trembling young woman said, referring to an appointment book on her desk. "Yes, the doctor has set aside the entire afternoon especially for you. Please have a seat in the waiting room. Would you like coffee?"

"My dear lady," the obnoxious woman with the prune face replied sarcastically, "I'm not accustomed to sitting with the general public. I don't want to catch anything from this rabble. Don't you have a VIP lounge for people of my stature?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Crabtree. Please have a seat; the doctor will be with you shortly."

The door opened and an attractive young blonde man in white doctors' garb looked into the waiting room with a concerned expression. Seeing the senator's wife lambasting the poor befuddled receptionist mercilessly, he rushed to her rescue. Straining to put on a cordial smile, he said, extending his hand, "Mrs. Crabtree, are you ready to be even more lovely than you already are?"

The wisp of a smirk cracked the woman's perpetually sour expression. She quickly abandoned the receptionist with disdain and strutted through the waiting room with the young doctor and the bodyguards trailing behind her.

Ignoring the doctor's gracious remark, the middle-age battleaxe said loudly, so everyone could hear her, "I hope you're plastic surgery skills are better than your hiring practices. The woman at the desk in that cheap Goodwill rag didn't have a clue who I was when I walked in. She actually suggested I sit with the trailer trash in the lobby."

Everyone within earshot glared at her as if she had tossed a toddler into the path of a speeding taxi. If looks could kill, Crabtree would have been murdered by all ten of the people seated in the waiting area.

Dr. Best held his tongue and escorted the pompous bitch toward the surgery area bustling with activity. He had a bad feeling the $30,000 tweaking of Crabtree's wrinkles and her nose job may not be worth the hassle of dealing with her. After several more confrontations with the staff, the anesthesiologist finally ended her venomous attacks with a

cocktail of sedatives.

Crabtree was forty-one years old and would've been a beautiful woman if not for her loathsome, pompous attitude and caustic tongue. No matter how much money she spent smoothing wrinkles that were barely visible, no one could tolerate her contemptuous, high-pitched, nasal voice that grated on the nerves like fingernails on a black board.

Best dreaded every moment he spent with Crabtree each year. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to endure the abuse since she was a senator's wife and a staple on every club and civic group in the city.

This year, in addition to smoothing a few wrinkles under her eyes, Crabtree had decided her nose was a bit too large. To make sure nothing was left to chance, Best spent the entire evening prior to the surgery agonizing over every detail of the procedure. He had even made the supreme sacrifice of giving his tickets to the Celine Dion concert at Madison Square Garden to a colleague.

For hours, he toyed with every possible scenario in his $10,000 makeover program on his computer. Finally, at about 1 AM, he pushed enter on his desktop, and suddenly, the perfect sized nose for Crabtree's face appeared on the monitor. He smiled and thought, "Wow, after a month of healing, Crabtree would have a face to die for." Carrying the thought further, he grimaced at the tragedy of transforming a woman with such a miserable attitude into a goddess.

He wondered if he would receive a gigantic tip for his extra efforts. Crabtree had greased his palm with an extra $5,000 last year when he'd done far less. She'd placed the check in his palm as if she was handing a bellman a tip for carrying her luggage. He might even be featured in the lead article in *Plastic Surgery Today* for such a work of art. Ah, well, enough dreaming. He decided to turn in so he could be fresh for tomorrow.

The next day, the minor procedure and the more intricate surgery went exactly as expected. Although the young doctor had done it hundreds of times, he took extra pains with Crabtree, his most important client.

* * *

After several weeks of changing bandages, the momentous day of removing the nose covering finally came. Best had pleaded with the pompous prima donna to refrain from peeking at his masterpiece until it was completely healed. As impossible as it seemed at first, Crabtree agreed not to look at the results until the day it would be unveiled to the public.

Maria, Dr. Best's most trusted assistant, did the honors of carefully removing the bandages as Crabtree reclined in an examination chair facing the doctor. When Maria lifted the housing protecting the nose, Best reclined in his plush, leather swivel chair and beamed with pride at not only the best nose job he'd ever performed but also the finest one he'd ever seen. Maria saw the broad grin on his face and raised her thumb high to corroborate that she agreed this was a remarkable accomplishment.

Turning Crabtree's chair around to face a large mirror surrounded by a circle of soft lights, Best and Maria awaited her expected expression of approval but instead, a shrill gut-wrenching scream brought the receptionist and several other doctors and nurses into the examination room.

"What have you done to my face, you incompetent butcher," Crabtree ranted. "Michael Jackson's nose was larger than mine when he died. You'll be hearing from my lawyers. Rest assured, I will see that your license is revoked, and you will never practice medicine again."

"You pompous bitch," Best screamed. "This is the best nose job I've ever seen. There's no one on earth that would say otherwise." Best strode off in a huff leaving his assistants to deal with the malicious woman as she continued to rant and rave at the top of her lungs.

At the legal hearing, despite Crabtree's stature in the community as the senator's wife, reputable surgeons agreed that Best's work had far exceeded the level of care expected for this type of plastic surgery. The judge dismissed the case and reprimanded Crabtree for wasting the court's time with such a frivolous lawsuit.

The New York Post carried Crabtree's stunningly gorgeous face on the front page of the morning edition under

the headline, “SENATOR’S WIFE FOUND TOO BEAUTIFUL; FRIVOLOUS CASE DISMISSED AGAINST PLASTIC SURGEON.

Crabtree fumed as she sat in her lush estate, and after referring to her Blackberry, made several calls. Fifteen minutes later, her sour expression morphed into a cruel smile as she returned her phone to her purse.

Two evenings later, a battering ram imploding his front door awakened Best from a sound sleep in the middle of the night. As he struggled to put on a robe, several police officers barged into his bedroom, blinded him with a flashlight, and started reading him his rights. The tallest officer lifted a bag of white powder in front of his face and declared he was under arrest for possession and selling an illegal substance to minors.

Best looked at the police officer as if he had lost his mind and begin to tell him clearly, he had no idea what he was talking about. He saw a team of forensic investigators collecting evidence in the living room as the first officer’s partner cuffed him, pushed him out the door, and escorted him down the stairs to their cruiser.

Despite many testimonials praising the character of Dr. Best and his spotless record of not even having a parking ticket, ten unsavory witnesses for the prosecution took an oath and swore they had seen Best selling drugs to minors on many occasions. The officers that searched the doctor’s house testified they had found large quantities of heroin and cocaine as well as other pharmaceuticals in a kitchen cabinet and in the trunk of Best’s car.

In addition to the fabricated evidence, Best complained to his attorney that half of the jurors seem to be biased against him from the start. He couldn't believe his lawyer had allowed such unsavory characters to be jurors without contesting it and suspected that Crabtree had even bribed his lawyer.

After a short trial, the jurors retired to their chambers, and in thirty minutes, returned to the courtroom with a verdict of guilty. With the senator’s wife’s input, the judge sentenced Best to ten years in a hard-core prison where the most horrific

murderers and perverts were serving time. The warden also had a reputation for cruelty and harsh treatment of the inmates.

* * *

Ten years later, Best left through the front gate of the prison. The eyes, once bright with youthful exuberance, joyful anticipation, and love of life, were now steely and cold.

He saw the taxi he had ordered parked along the high chain link fence topped with razor wire. About twenty yards to the right, the sentry in the tower above him glared down at him like he was a piece of road kill. He assumed the psycho in the mirrored sunglasses was trying to rattle him by continuing to point his rifle in his direction.

Best walked to the cab with a small suitcase and got into the back seat.

"Where to?" the driver asked with a sullen expression that made it painfully clear he did not want an ex-con for a client.

Best said, looking back into the cold stare in the rearview mirror, "Take me to the Safe Haven Inn on Remington Avenue in Mount Glory."

Pushing some buttons on this GPS monitor, the cab driver said sarcastically, "The fare for that location is over $100. I need to see a credit card or some cash to go to Jersey."

Best's granite face returned the perpetually icy stare, "You don't think I look trustworthy?"

"You can't be too careful these days on fares from this location," the cabbie replied, still looking for some reassurance.

Best pulled out his wallet and showed the driver several Benjamins tucked inside.

"You've already got $20 on the meter for waiting time. You said to be here at 3 PM."

"Sorry, fella, I couldn't get the guards to move any faster. They decided to give me one last cavity search for old time's sake."

The cabbie grinned, pressed a button on the meter, and pulled away.

Best and the driver didn't speak on the way to Mount Glory.

When the taxi veered onto the Remington Avenue exit, Best noticed the manicured lawns and the houses seemed a little shabbier than he remembered. The long climb to the top of the steep hill brought back memories of a commute he'd had during a snowstorm long ago.

When the cabbie pulled into the Safe Haven Inn parking lot and announced loudly they had reached their destination. Best flinched from a momentary doze, paid the fare, and exited the cab with his small suitcase.

When he reached the front desk, he showed the clerk his new Visa card and rented a room for a week. He hoped this would be adequate time for him to find a way to get to Crabtree. He couldn't go on with the rest of his life until he gave her that special makeover he'd been dreaming of for more than 3,650 days.

After placing his suitcase in his room and checking his Ipad for a time, he returned to the front desk and found the bus to Ralston would leave in ten minutes.

When Best made his way to the stop directly in front of the motel, he felt a twinge of sadness at seeing the Old Blarney Irish Pub across the street. He and his fiancée had eaten many a plate of corn beef and cabbage there before he went to prison. Marcy, the only girl he ever loved, had married another plastic surgeon, and had two kids now. He heard they lived somewhere in Connecticut. The bus arrived right on time and he boarded it, still reminiscing his lost love and what might have been.

Best exited the bus in Ralston, walked a few blocks to a Budget Rent-A-Car location, and signed up for a week's rental of an Impala.

Leaving from the Budget lot, Best drove to a storage facility he had rented to store his personal belongings after his arrest.

Pulling up to the container, he got out the car, found the box, and unlocked it with the key from a ring in his pocket. Seeing the leather suitcase his father had given him at graduation was like seeing a long-lost friend. He pulled back

the catches on the case, heard the familiar snap, and raised the lid. He smiled when he saw the set of stainless steel scalpels glimmering in the sunlight.

His fingers tingled with anticipation at what he would do to Crabtree with his beautiful scalpels once he got her on the table. Each time a group of prison bulls held him down and took turns sodomizing him, he thought of each incision he planned to make when he got out, over and over again. He closed the case, placed it in the trunk of the Impala, and returned to the motel.

Once in his room, he removed his iPad from his suitcase and started surfing the net for anything he could find about Malcolm Crabtree. Best had been following the senator's career whenever he could get his hands on a computer in the slammer. Unfortunately, the senator had been recently reelected for another term, which meant surveillance on him and his wife would be an obstacle Best would have to overcome.

At thirty-two years old, Best had been the youngest and the most successful plastic surgeon on Fifth Avenue. Even now, at forty-two, he looked younger than his years with his classic baby face, except for the two facial scars the prison bulls had given him while fighting them off. He would have them removed when he reached his final destination. Until then, he would have to rely on his expertise with makeup to play the parts he would need to play to get to Crabtree. He had become an expert in the field from taking extensive courses at Westmore Academy in LA to complement his skills in plastic surgery.

Looking in the bathroom mirror, rather than seeing the pretty boy look he was accustomed to, he saw someone who might play the next James Bond with his rugged masculine square jaw and his rock solid muscular biceps.

The next day, Best parked as close as he could to the senator's estate without arousing suspicion. Right away, he was demoralized when he realized how hard it was going to be to get Crabtree alone. Based on her husband's lofty position as senator, she usually had several beefy bodyguards watching her every move.

On Monday, after several fruitless days of surveillance, he saw a red Porsche pull up to the front gate. Through his binoculars, Best caught a glimpse of a young, athletic-looking super-stud in the impressive car. The handsome blond man smiled at the guard, and after a few words and a look at a clipboard, the tall man in a blue uniform opened the gate and waved him through.

Three hours later, Best saw the young man return to the gate, say a few words to the guard, and drive away. Best made a note in his phone of the date and time the young man had come and left the estate.

That evening, he saw in the evening paper, the senator was attending a convention in Atlantic City that week.

The next afternoon at approximately the same time as the day before, a white Jaguar pulled up at the gate. Once again, Best saw a strikingly handsome young man with biceps bulging in his expensive looking polo shirt, speak to the guard for a few seconds, and enter after the gate lifted. The young stud had long, dark shoulder-length hair, and a surfer tan.

Four hours later, the visitor waved to the guard as he drove through the security gate.

Best pulled into the road and followed the man in his Jaguar to an upscale high-rise office complex with views of the city. He unobtrusively followed him into the lobby and watched him enter a plush office on the first level. The sign at the entrance read “HAMMER MAGNUM ESCORT SERVICE. The window display had ten portraits of muscular, handsome men showing perfect white teeth in extremely provocative poses. Best recognized the blond man he’d seen driving the Porsche the day before lying on a white, bear skin rug wearing only a skimpy Speedo in one of the photos.

“My God,” he thought, “how could a senator’s wife get away with such an obvious tryst in her own home? The senator was at least twenty-five years older than his wife and looked like the perfect candidate for a heart attack.

Best noticed that golf and tennis lessons as well as physical fitness training were alternative services the Hammer Magnum group provided. Could one of the muscle-bound bruisers be teaching Crabtree golf or tennis? Somehow, he

doubted it.

The next afternoon, a young red-haired man with a mustache pulled up to the gate in an Alpha Romero convertible. Best could see a set of golf clubs in the back seat, and the hunk, who reminded him of someone who might be in a Calvin Klein commercial, had a magnificent tan and wore rich looking clothes.

The passing of each day seemed like an eternity, but he continued the maddening surveillance with the patience of Job.

During the second week, he saw the blond man pull up to the gate in his Porsche on Monday at one p.m., the same as he did the previous week.

The next day, the same dark man came at the same time as before, and the following day, the third man arrived, just as he had the previous week.

“Christ,” he thought, “that horny bitch certainly has an insatiable sex drive for her age.” He also knew her husband had returned from Atlantic City over a week ago, and her trysts had continued even with the senator in town under the same roof. Best wondered what the old fart was doing to satisfy his libido if he could still get it up. Was his nymphomaniac wife doing him, too?

When the blond man appeared on the next Monday at the same time, Best decided to put his plan into motion the next afternoon.

That evening, he followed Crabtree's lover for the next day to an exclusive nightclub. He struck up a conversation with him at the bar and slipped a packet of Rohypnol into his drink at the first opportunity.

When the drug and the model could no longer hold his head up, Best told the bartender he was a friend who had too much to drink. Fortunately, the bartender didn't know the model and got two bouncers to help Best get him to his car. When the valet pulled up at the entrance, Best gave the attendant the parking stub and a huge tip and the bouncers laid the semi-conscious man on the back seat.

When Best got the man back to the shit hole he had rented for the occasion, he strapped him to the dilapidated

king-size bed with duct tape. He was out like a light and snoring peacefully the moment his head hit the pillow. The drugs Best put in the man's drink were supposed to keep him down until morning. Afterward, an even better cocktail of drugs would keep him in La La Land for at least twenty-four more hours. By then, Best hoped be somewhere in South America if everything went as planned.

Best spent two hours applying makeup to make himself look as much like Crabtree's lover as possible. He went to the escort's apartment and tried on some of his clothes. They weren't perfect, but one set of pants and a shirt were close enough. Of the three men, this man was the closest to Best's own physique and coloring.

He found a large pair of aviator sunglasses, which covered at least a third of his face. If Best could bluff his way through the gate, he believed he would have a chance to make it inside the house. He didn't want to hurt the guard, but he would if he had to. He didn't expect Crabtree would have many servants at the house when she had sex with someone half her age, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

When he pulled up in front of the gate, Best held his phone in his left hand against his face, which partially blocked the view of the guard through the side window. He was wearing the model's Omega watch, and he had a silk scarf wrapped high on his neck to avoid the security guard's direct stare.

Trying to emulate what the others had done before, he lowered the phone slightly and said, "How's it going, George?"

The guard glanced at him in the black Jaguar and made a note on his clipboard. Then, he unexpectedly said, "Do you think Jeter will be able to play tonight? The Yanks really need this game."

Best paused a beat and tried to maintain his composure. He had heard the model speak a few sentences, but he really didn't know exactly how he sounded when he talked, and he didn't know shit about baseball. He paused from his phone conversation, and lifting his eyes slightly rather than his head, he said, "I hope he can do more than play. Let's hope he can

get a hit."

"Amen, brother," the tall man in blue answered. Then, for a split second, his expression seemed to darken, causing Best to tighten his grip on the 38 he 'd brought along that was hidden from sight. He held his breath until the guard finally turned away and hit a button on the wall inside his post. When the gate finally lifted, he wasted no time driving the Jaguar through.

Best continued up the drive and parked in the circular driveway in front of the house like Crabtree's other lovers had done. His sport coat concealed his gun, which he placed in his belt in the small of his back. He held the Taser in his right hand and rang the doorbell with his left.

When the door opened, Best saw the seductive smile on Crabtree's face morph into an expression of shock and confusion. She let out a shrill shriek and started to retreat backwards when he lunged after her and gave her a painful jolt of electricity. Her body went completely limp, and she pitched forward and she fell face first on to the ceramic tile floor. The dainty nose Best had given her ten years before flattened with a sickening thud, and a sliver of her front tooth bounced like a white marble across the tile. Best grinned like a man who had just won the lottery when he saw the blood pooling at her nostrils on the expensive floor.

As he returned to the car for his scalpels and other paraphernalia, Best wondered if George had heard Crabtree's scream. He peered across the driveway in the direction of the gate, but saw no sign of the guard bounding to the rescue. He listened, but no phone was ringing. After two trips of carting the tools of his trade into the house, he closed the massive entry door and placed his equipment on the dining room table. He lifted Crabtree's svelte middle-aged carcass and dumped it unceremoniously onto the magnificent mahogany table like a sack of potatoes. It pleased him to hear her head thump upon the exquisite high gloss surface. He chuckled at the thought of her having a nice bump on her brow tomorrow morning to complement his surgical atrocities.

Extracting various straps and constricting devices, Best spent a half an hour fastening the miserable bitch to the

hundred thousand dollar dining room table. He turned on the crystal chandelier, which hung from the sixteen foot ceiling, that he imagined might weigh close to a ton. He tweaked the dimmer slightly to diminish the blinding candlepower of the decadent light fixture. The lighting wasn't perfect for the facelift, but it would have to do.

Best had spent ten years agonizing over every incision of this masterpiece that would be talked about far more than any other plastic surgery ever performed. It took a master to make someone beautiful. The great surgeons of the day performed the procedure thousands of times, but no one had purposely performed surgery to make a face so monstrous that no human being on earth could bear to see it without recoiling in horror.

Each time, a prison bull had mounted him while four others held him down until they too could climb aboard for sloppy seconds, thirds, and so on, only this was what kept him going. His only reason for living was to give Crabtree a makeover so horrible that everyone who saw it would puke their guts out.

Best began his task with painstaking precision. Each incision was a labor of love. To achieve the ultimate horror, he had to strip the face of symmetry completely. After four hours of reshaping, adding, subtracting, this and that he stepped back to admire his thoughtful artistry. As he walked right and then left, depending on what direction he looked at it, he saw flashes of almost every movie monster he had ever seen in some part of Crabtree's face.

The top of her head was partially skull-like and partially hairy like a balding gorilla with one horn protruding from one side of her head. One eyeball was a bloody socket, and the other a bulging orb with black spider veins that could actually see nestled in the cheek between the nose and the ear. Another bloodshot eye peered out from the middle of her forehead. One side of the twisted mouth sported curled uneven teeth, and the other had small, chipmunk teeth like the vampire from the silent era of film. One eyebrow was hairless and one appeared to be born from a werewolf. He could see flashes of the *Predator, Alien*, the monster from *The Descent*,

Nosferatu, *The Phantom of the Opera*, the werewolf from *The Howling* and even a little of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Best could barely keep from puking himself as he admired his excellent work.

It was a masterpiece, and now that it was finished, he could go on with the rest of his life.

The final decision was should he wait until Crabtree became conscious and saw herself in the mirror or should he split and be on his way south right away. The longer he waited, the greater the possibility something would go wrong.

But, after all these years of anticipation, there was no way he could leave without seeing Crabtree's face when she looked in the mirror. It would be priceless. A cherished memory he would treasure for the rest of his life. He decided to wait no matter what the consequences.

Suddenly, from the right, three men in black suits burst into the room with assault rifles. When Best reached for his gun in his belt, two more men grabbed him and wrestled him to the floor. He recognized the senator shuffling into the room looking twenty years older than he did on TV.

“Your name is Michael Best. Correct?” the old man asked.

After Best said nothing, three beefy men lifted him from the floor and holding him fast, pointed him in the direction of Senator Crabtree, who started grinning from ear to ear, “You don't have to talk, we already know who you are. I suspected you might be angry after the ten years of sodomy she put you through, so we've been watching your every move since you got out. Believe me, it wasn't my idea to frame you. I guess you learned the hard way that my wife is a very vindictive woman.”

Best watched George, the guard from the front gate, enter the room. He was no longer dressed in his uniform and was pointing a gun at him. The three muscular male escorts strode in next, and the one he had drugged and then impersonated lunged at him and gave him a crippling blow to the midsection. “Sorry, Best,” he said, “I couldn't resist the cheap shot after what you put me through.”

“How long will my wife be out?” the senator asked the

doctor who was writhing in pain on the floor.

The senator lit a cigar and waited for him to catch his breath from the sucker punch.

When Best was able to sit up, he still refused to answer the question.

“Hey Joe, get the hedge trimmers, the senator barked. Let's take off a few fingers until the doctor decides to talk.”

A small man with a cruel smile disappeared into the garage. After a brief absence, he returned with the hedge trimmers.

“Look, Best, this is going to get ugly unless you tell me what I want to know,” the senator prodded.

The small man moved toward the doctor with the heavy-duty garden tool.

“All right, all right,” Best shouted, squirming backwards as much as he could with two men holding him.

“I gave her a much lighter dose than usual. She's going to be coming out of it very soon, and when she does, she’s going to be in excruciating pain.”

“Damn, Best, you’re a real masochist, but you know, I really don't blame you,” the senator said, obviously enjoying every minute of the proceedings.

“Are you going to kill me after what I did to your wife?” the doctor asked.

“Kill you?” the senator said, a grin filling his red alcoholic face. “No, we're not going to kill you. I’d give you a medal if I could, but I won't be able to do that.”

The room full of thugs chuckled, then, they all looked at each other like the senator had told a sidesplitting joke.

“When my bodyguards and me came home, we caught you red-handed right after you murdered the only woman I ever loved.” the senator said.

Everyone, except Best laughed in unison.

“You wanted revenge after what she had done to you for all those years,” the senator continued.

“What do you mean? Your wife isn’t dead. She's messed up, I’ll grant you that. I don't think you're going to enjoy fucking her with the face I've given her, but medically, there’s no reason foe her not to live a long, humiliating life. Happily, no

surgeon can correct what I've done to her."

"Hey, no hard feelings, Doc," the senator said. "I've got no problem with what you did. I know my wife's a bitch, and I've wanted to get rid of her for a long time. I'm sorry I can't reward you for what you're gonna do for me."

"I'm not going to do anything for you," Best replied firmly. "If you want her dead, you'll have to get one of your hired thugs to do it. I've done what I set out to do. So have at it, you miserable creep. Blow her brains out."

The senator stared at him incredulously with his mouth agape, "Damn, doc, you're not too fast on the uptake. We don't need you to pull the trigger. We need you to take the fall for the murder wrap. Capiche?"

Suddenly, Best understood what the senator had in store for him. He could already feel the prison bulls reaming him another asshole.

"Yeah, I'd say killing a senator's wife should get you life without any possibility of parole since the state doesn't have the death penalty. But before we blow her brains out with your gun and call the cops to take you away, don't you want to see the look on the bitch's face when she looks in the mirror?"

The senator threw his hands in the air like the conductor of the New York Symphony, and everyone in the room, except Best, shouted with gusto in unison, "We do!"

And then like the sweetest music ever played on earth, they heard Crabtree's pitiful whine begin to vibrate the crystal in the dining room fixture. An arsenal of firearms turned n her direction.

Like a putrid carcass of road kill ravaged by a flock of turkey buzzards on a hot summer day, the monstrous face rose from the table and tried to focus with two of her three eyes on the mirror in front of her.

For a few seconds, everyone stood like statues, riveted in their tracks, unable to breathe from the unspeakable horror before them.

Then, everyone, including Best, who was about to spend the rest of his life being sodomized by prison bulls, broke into a tirade of uproarious, hysterical laughter, as Crabtree began to scream and scream and scream some more….

Witch Albert

Marty saw the toy figure lying on the sidewalk through the white picket fence. He was ten years old and small for his age. Due to the number of derelicts passing on their way to the local soup kitchen, his mother had warned him to stay away from the gate and never to talk to strangers when he played in the front yard. Sparky, the family's German shepherd stood vigil outside his doghouse and kept a protective eye on him. Whenever anyone passed, the dog would bark a warning and bare his teeth. Marty felt perfectly safe with Sparky standing guard.

Against his mother's strict orders, the boy approached

the fence and scrutinized the toy man with one leg on the sidewalk and the other in a patch of grass along the curb. Picking up a branch that had fallen into the yard from a nearby oak, Marty stuck it through the opening between the slats in the fence and tried to drag the toy man across the sidewalk so he could grab it.

Try as he may, he could not loosen the figure stuck in a crevice at the edge of the concrete.

Out of nowhere, he heard someone approaching on the walk to the left. Turning his head, and quickly removing the worthless branch, he scooted backward into the safety of the fenced yard behind a shrub. Mortified the person might see what he considered a treasure and snatch it for himself; he closed his eyes and hoped the stranger would pass without noticing it.

When he thought the pedestrian had finally passed, Marty peeked to see if the toy figure was still there. He winced when he saw an ugly, old woman with a pointed nose and chin wearing a long black cape and hood standing at the gate leering at him.

Reaching down, she plucked the toy man from the sidewalk and held it up in her wrinkled hand. “Is this what you want, sonny?” the old crone croaked.

Sparky growled and continued to bark. Marty sat transfixed and speechless, staring at the creepy burn scars on the woman’s face and the white film covering the pupil of her right eye.”

“Cat got your tongue, sonny. Don’t be frightened; I’m just an old woman who got burned in a house fire. I mean you no harm.” She placed the toy on top of a fence post and stepped back from the gate.

Marty wished she would leave so he could grab the toy and add it to his collection, but he dared not venture forth with her standing so close. Sparky’s chain could not reach the front gate.

After several minutes of a stalemate, the crone sighed and trudged off. When she turned right at the corner and disappeared from sight, Marty ran to the post, grabbed the toy man, and darted inside the house.

Bounding up the stairs to his room, he placed the new addition to his collection with the eight others on a shelf next to his bed. The figure was a handsome prince with shoulder length brown hair. Dressed in a dark brown tunic and green pants, he reminded him of Robin Hood. He had a silver sword melded into a scabbard, and a red gem dangled from his neck. Marty beamed with excitement and, after thoughtful deliberation, named him Prince Albert.

When he went to bed that evening, he noticed the new man seemed to emit a peculiar inner light, unlike the others that were totally opaque.

In the morning, after brushing his teeth and dressing for school, Marty noticed one of his favorite men, Mighty Man, missing from the shelf. He was positive he had been there when he went to bed.

Marty searched his room for the missing super hero, but finding nothing, he trudged down the stairs to breakfast in frustration.

During breakfast, his mother noticed his long face and asked, “What’s wrong, darling?”

“Mighty Man is missing. I looked everywhere, but I can’t find him.”

“Don’t worry; I’m sure he’ll turn up. It’s time for the bus.”

All day long at school, Marty wondered about the strange disappearance of Mighty Man.

The next night before turning in, he noticed Prince Albert looked slightly taller than his other figures. “Maybe the new man was defective,” he thought. When he turned off the light, he had the uncanny sensation he was not alone. He had never had such a creepy feeling before in his own room, even at an early age. Pulling the sheet over his head, he listened for an unfamiliar sound, but after a time, he drifted off to “sleep.

The next morning, Marty threw out his arms and yawned loudly. His eyes immediately fell upon the space in the middle of the row of toy men. “Mom,” he shouted. “Pulse Pounder is missing. Were you in my room this morning?”

From the master bedroom, his mother called out, “No. When I went to my exercise class at seven, I looked in on you,

but I didn't come inside your room. Your figures couldn't have walked away by themselves. You must have put them somewhere. Where did you have them last?"

Her question hung in the air without a response as he picked up Prince Albert and studied him. He seemed even bigger and taller than yesterday. His handsome features had taken on a more villainous undertone, and his cloak had become a darker shade of purple, almost black. Two of his favorite men had disappeared, and he believed Prince Albert had something to do with it. Picking up his new acquisition, he placed it in the file cabinet next to his computer and locked the drawer.

That evening, after finishing his homework, he started watching TV, but he could not focus on the programs. He kept thinking about Mighty Man and Pulse Pounder and what Prince Albert might do next.

At nine o'clock, his mother called out from her easy chair and crossword puzzle, "Time for bed!"

Before turning in, Marty tried the file drawer and found it still locked. He looked at the seven men on the shelf and made a mental note of their position. After turning off the light, he wondered what he would find in the morning. Not long after, he fell into a deeper sleep than the night before.

In the early morning, Marty started tossing and turning. In a nightmare, Prince Albert had grown as tall as his father had, and his face had changed into the monster in *Jeepers Creepers*. His hands had become grotesque claws, and he had a mouthful of tiny, pointed teeth. When he spread his bat like wings, he could fly. Out of a dense fog, Marty came to the master bedroom door and opened it. Before him, he found the hideous, winged monster hovering over his parents while they slept with long, menacing claws poised to strike.

Marty awoke screaming, his tee shirt wet with sweat. He could not keep his hands from shaking. He jumped from bed and ran to his parent's bedroom. To his surprise, the bed had been made, and everything looked the way it always did. The smell of bacon from the kitchen brought an enormous sigh of relief.

Returning to his room, he started dressing for school. It

was then he saw only five figures on the shelf. Crimson Crusader was gone, and the file cabinet drawer was open next to the computer. Prince Albert stood alone on the end table with a trace of toy man blood on his lips. His dark purple cape had become as black as coal. The deep-set, sinister eyes were cruel, and a long, pointed nose and chin riddled with scars protruded from the executioner's hood he wore about his face. Marty shuddered when he realized his new toy man had become a toy figure of the ugly woman who had placed Prince Albert on top of the gate, but now, the figure had grown bigger and taller than yesterday. He wanted desperately to tell his parents, but he knew they would never believe him.

His mother shouted from the kitchen, "Marty, breakfast is ready, and the bus leaves in fifteen minutes."

He trudged down to the kitchen and took a seat at the table. He wasn't hungry, but he ate a piece of bacon and a forkful of scrambled eggs to make his mother happy.

Returning to his room, he placed the witch figure in his backpack and ran outside to catch the bus.

When he crossed the Tamerack Bridge before reaching the middle school, Marty removed the toy figure from his backpack and hurled it through the open window. When it disappeared below the plane of the bridge's guardrails, he felt confident his troubles were over. Further, out in the distance, he saw the white water crashing against the rocks below, and knew the dreaded prince who had become a witch had gone to a watery grave.

Marty slept well that night. He didn't know if he would ever find his three missing men, but at least, he had the other five to play with. His warm, fuzzy feeling dissipated the moment he opened his eyes the next morning. He couldn't believe it when he found only four toy men on the shelf. Midnight Monster was missing. Even though, Witch Albert was nowhere in sight, he could still feel the menacing evil of her magic in the room.

Dressing in record time, he scurried down the stairs to the breakfast table. His father was reading the paper, and his mother was preparing waffles. Taking a deep breath, he said,

“Mom. Dad. You were right about the boogeyman in my closet and the troll in the flowerbed, but this time, I know I’m right. For once, I need you to stop what you’re doing and listen.”

Both their mouths dropped open, and his mother took a seat at the table.

“An old woman placed a toy man on top of our gate. I think she used it as bait so she could grab me, but I stayed away from the fence like you told me. Sparky was barking so she couldn’t come into the yard. When she finally left, I picked up the toy man and added it to my collection. I was so happy. At least, I was at first. He was the coolest figure I’d ever seen, and none of my friends had him.”

“You never mentioned this new toy to us?” his mother said, returning to the stove.

“No, I didn’t. I felt weird about keeping something that might belong to someone else, but the old woman picked it up off the sidewalk and gave it to me. I should’ve told you, but I was afraid you wouldn’t let me keep it.”

“I don’t understand the problem, son,” his father replied sympathetically. “I don’t think we care if you keep the toy. If someone comes along to claim it, I’m sure you can find another one just as…cool at the store for your birthday next week.”

“The problem is since I added the new man to my collection; I find one of my original men missing every day when I get up. And Prince Albert, that’s what I named him, is getting bigger and taller each day, and he looks just like the old woman who left him on the fence in the first place.”

“That’s quite a story for this early in the morning,” his mother replied. “I can see we’re not going to solve this now; it’s almost time for the bus. Eat a waffle, and let your father and me talk about it while you’re at school.’

“I’m not hungry!” Marty shouted. “You don’t believe me, do you? Real life is just like in the movies; no one will believe you until it’s too late.”

“I believe you believe what you are saying, but how could a new plastic man eat an old plastic man and change from a man into a woman in the process?” his father said, trying to hide the smile widening on his face.

His mother added, “It’s likely you had a bad dream. Have any of your friends come for a visit? Maybe they took your men and left you a different one they didn’t want.”

“I threw Witch Albert, that’s what I call him now, out the window of the bus into the river yesterday while we were crossing the bridge.”

“Oh,” his mother said happily, as she buttered half a waffle. “Maybe you solved your own problem.”

Marty stared blankly at the refrigerator and said, “Another figure was missing this morning. Somehow, Witch Albert must have come back.”

His parents looked at each other, and his father said, “Before you leave, go to your room, and bring down the Prince or the Witch, whichever it is now, I want to take a look at it.”

“She’s hiding somewhere in my room. I can’t find her.”

“Maybe she’s still in the river.” His mother chirped enthusiastically.

“No!” Marty screamed. ”She’s here, somewhere, I tell you. Midnight Monster is missing this morning, and I think Witch Albert ate him.”

“Let’s don’t talk about the prince who became a witch now. We’ll talk tonight. I’m sure there’s a plausible explanation for all of this,” his father said, trying to look hopeful.

Marty grabbed a waffle and hurried out the front door to catch the bus.

Looking down at the white water below the bridge as the bus headed toward school, Marty wondered why Witch Albert had come to his house to cast her magic spell, and more importantly, what she would do after she ate all of his toy men. Would he be next?

Mulling it all over in his mind, he suddenly realized the figure of the witch that Prince Albert had become not only reminded him of the old woman on the sidewalk, but someone else he had known long ago. The cloudy image hung in his thoughts, but he couldn’t remember where he’d seen it. The bus pulled into the parking lot, and he followed the other students inside.

During lunch, he asked his friend, Fred, “Can you think of any kids at school who died or got hurt really bad since we

started here?"

"The only one I can think of is Margaret Long, You must remember her. She's the one who hanged herself after her parents burned to death in a house fire. If you ever saw her, you'd never forget her face. It was like something out of a horror flick," Fred groaned, looking at the clock on the wall.

A fire… Margaret Long hanging herself… Each image exploded in Marty's mind's eye like a molten bat straight from the blackest recesses of Hell. Immediately, he remembered everything about what Fred had just said as if it had happened yesterday.

He closed his eyes and began to search his darkest thoughts. Gruesome visions of memories that only moments ago seemed completely erased from his mind had returned with a vengeance. He saw Prince Albert's handsome face morph into the scarred face with the bulging eyeball of the witch on the sidewalk, then into the horror of Margaret Long's face after the fire. The nightmare images hung suspended in the blackness behind his eyes. He remembered the suicide note that said she could not go on any longer with the hideous scars she had received in the fire.

Fred looked at him. "Are you okay? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"I think I did see a ghost," Marty said in a weird stupor his friend had never seen before. The bell rang, and when Fred saw Marty's eyes beginning to focus again, he scurried off to his next class.

Marty had to stay with Fred for basketball practice and caught a ride home with Fred's father. The sun was going down when he opened the gate to his house.

He didn't know why, but he had a bad feeling about what he would find inside.

When Marty entered the yard, he missed Sparky's familiar woof of hello. The motion detectors in the eaves triggered the yard lights to illuminate the area around the doghouse toward the back of the property. When he approached, he found the German shepherd lying motionless with his eyes wide open. He knew he was dead. He looked the same as the dog they had before Sparky looked after a

car had run over him. Why would Margaret's evil spirit send Witch Albert to kill his dog?

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he realized he would never see Sparky again. The lights in the kitchen were ablaze. Should he run down to Fred's and get his father or go directly into the house to check on his parents? He was only ten years old. What could he do if the witch was in the house? The heavy feeling of dread returned as he unlocked the front door and went in.

"Mom! Dad! Where are you? Sparky is dead," he shrieked, entering the kitchen.

There was no reply. The eerie silence unnerved him.

Passing through the laundry room, he opened the door to the garage and found the blue Buick parked inside. *Where were his parents? At the neighbors' house? He didn't think so.*

The sound of the icemaker startled him as he headed into the foyer. The black bedrooms at the top of the stairs seemed to beckon him as he climbed one agonizing step at a time. His eyes flitted to the left and then the right as he braced for something to spring upon him from the shadows.

Placing his hand on the railing, he found it sticky to the touch. He turned on the light and saw a trail of bloody footprints on the treads leading down from the bedroom level.

"Mom! Dad!" he screamed as he bounded up the stairs. Reaching the landing, he saw that the trail of blood led to the master bedroom and then to his bedroom.

"Was this really happening or was it a horrible nightmare?" He paused at the door to his parent's bedroom, and then pushed it open. Gasping for breath, he turned on the lights and saw bits and pieces of his Mom and Dad strewn about the blood-spattered room. He recognized his mother's gold earring on an ear lying next to the bedpost, and saw his father's anchor tattoo on a severed forearm. Everywhere he looked, he saw more ghastly evidence that some inhuman monster had sliced and diced his parents almost beyond recognition. He fell to his knees, and began to cry like he had never cried before.

His head began to spin as flashes of memories flitted like leaves across the landscape of his mind. From out of

nowhere, a picture of a large building with barred windows floated by in his mind like a phantom.

He remembered his father asking, “Son, are you having flashbacks again?”

“Flashbacks*?”* Marty thought. “What did he mean?”

Then, his father turned to his mother and with a worried look on his face asked, “You’re sure he’s still taking his medication, aren’t you?”

“Medication? What medication?” Marty remembered saying out loud.

A small room with padded walls flashed into view. A pink teddy bear with no eyes lay on an ugly gray floor.

He remembered his father saying, “The doctor said he might remember the fire someday, and if he did, it could bring back his psychopathic tendencies.”

Marty didn’t remember where he was when he heard his mother say, “Marty is fine. It’s been two years since he came home from the institution, and the doctor said his episodes would not return if he took his medication every day. Believe me, I monitor his medication every day right after I brush my teeth, and I know with certainty, he’s never missed once since he came home from the sanitarium.”

Marty remembered her expression of horror when she poured the pills from a vial into the palm of her hand and discovered they were not the pills the doctor had prescribed.

It seemed like he heard his parents screaming at each other from far, far away, a long time ago.

Then, Marty remembered his mother’s terrifying words “return to the institution for shock treatments” that rattled every fiber of his being.

He found them in the master bedroom when he returned with the axe from the garage. His father was reading his emails on his Ipad when the first blow caught him between the neck and his shoulder blade. It was pathetic the way he begged for mercy and tried to crawl into the walk-in closet. His mother was on the toilet when he bolted in and split her head open again and again.

Everything was so clear now. He remembered he kept chopping them into smaller and smaller pieces. That’s why he

could barely raise his arm to shoot basketball with Fred.

He remembered the blood from his soaked tee shirt swirling down the drain when he took his shower to get ready for school. The bus came right on time, just like always. It was all so clear now. He had taken another one of his toy figures with him to throw into the rapids on his way to school, just as he had done every day that week. He had no idea why he threw his men into the river, but it felt satisfying.

He remembered Margaret's father had slapped him when he had caused everyone to laugh at the way she stuttered when he came to pick her up at the birthday party. It was the first time anyone had struck him, and he didn't like it. It didn't take long to find out where they lived. When he told his parents he had burned their house down, men in white jackets took him away to live in an institution for what seemed like an eternity.

He would rather die than go back there. He would kill anyone who tried to send him back.

He looked at the blood, gore, pieces of bones, organs and shredded limbs strewn about the grisly chaos of the master bedroom. If only he hadn't lost it when his mother said "shock treatments."

Returning to the kitchen, he severed the gas line behind the stove with the axe, placed three lit candles on the breakfast nook table, and headed toward Fred's house at the end of the block.

"Maybe the fire would destroy the evidence like it had in several movies he'd seen when a gas line exploded," he thought.

Just as he rang the doorbell at Fred's front door, the gas line exploded. The earsplitting blast and the fireball was better than any fireworks display he ever seen, and it blew away the houses next to his.

What would happen to him now? Maybe they would give him a new set of parents. Marty smiled like a boy who had just taken candy from a baby.

No one knew he was with Margaret when she hanged herself. With his help, of course.

The Boogeyman

Each day after supper, Agnes went for her two-mile evening constitutional before settling down to watch TV before bedtime. A little exercise after eating made her feel less bloated, allowed her to sleep better, and diminish the calories required to stay at her current weight of 120 pounds.

She weighed the same as she had as a teenager. At the last high school reunion, many of her female classmates at Stonewall had ballooned up. She didn't even recognize some of them. Agnes had always cared about the way she looked and never wanted to be fat.

Her husband died last year, and it was lonely in their big house by herself, and a little scary, but at this point in her life, it suited her just fine. She really didn't want to start another relationship with an old geezer. Just thinking about a grizzled old reprobate groping her at her age made her skin crawl. Now, if a young Clint Eastwood or Richard Gere would try to get her in the sack that was another story, but that would never happen.

The evening walk on the path that followed Route 11 went the same as always. She smiled when a young man, who could have been her grandson, blew his horn as he stormed noisily past in a red Corvette. Her body was pretty svelte, thank you, but she was 65 years old, and no longer bothered to color her graying hair. Maybe the young man needed glasses in addition to a new muffler.

She took the path following the high road on the way to the convenience store, which was almost exactly half way. On the path returning, which followed the low road, Agnes had to walk through a covered bridge. The wooden structure about 100 feet long was always as dark as a cave even in daylight. She had almost reached the middle when she thought she heard footsteps behind her. The large support posts on both sides of the bridge could easily hide a person if they stood behind one of them. These foreboding posts had really frightened her at first. Now, after a decade of walking through without anyone jumping out and pouncing on her, she rarely gave it a second thought. But tonight was different. She really thought she heard footsteps behind her after entering the bridge.

Stopping abruptly, she turned and looked back. It was too dark to see anything. She listened for the slightest sound and mentally prepared herself to go into an all-out run if need be. But, just like always, she only heard the sound of the stream rushing across the rocks below. It comforted her to know that unless the pervert caught her off guard, she could easily outrun him. It would take a seasoned athlete to catch her if she started sprinting for her life. She had participated in the Boston Marathon five times in her younger days, and she

knew she could run pretty fast even now.

When she reached the end of the bridge, she thought she heard the footsteps again and turned abruptly as before and listened. “Is someone there?” she cried out.

Suddenly, several bats flew from the rafters and swooped past her head, sending her into a defensive crouch. After resuming an erect stance, she melted behind a post and didn't move a muscle for several minutes. Stealthily, she peeked around the post; almost certain something big and terrible would be standing there to grab her. To her utter surprise, there was nothing, but the sound of water running and the gentle whisper of the wind in the trees. She could see the opening at the end of the bridge, but couldn't detect anything moving across it.

In the last half mile, Agnes stopped several more times and looked back. She still had the uncanny feeling someone lurked in the stand of trees along the path.

When she finally stepped up on her porch and looked back at the empty road, she felt silly she'd let her imagination get the best of her. Then, she gasped when she saw the front door standing wide open. She remembered closing and locking it when she left for her walk. Or was that yesterday she remembered so vividly?

She hadn’t left the door unlocked even once since she moved there ten years before. Reaching inside, she switched on the light. Her heart pounded as she stood peering into the dimly lit interior beyond the foyer. Nothing stirred, and nothing seemed out-of-place.

Should she call 911? The intruder, if there was one, could still be in the house. Had she left the front door open? It was possible, she guessed, but not probable.

“Better safe than sorry,” she said aloud as she returned to the front yard and called 911 on her cell.

Immediately, a woman’s voice came on the line, “What is your emergency?”

Agnes replied, “I believe someone has broken into my home.”

“What is the address?”

“99 Barbary Lane, Mt. Jackson.”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“This is Agnes Schwartz, the owner of the property. Is this Maude Kline, my old bowling buddy?”

“It sure is, Agnes. Is Henry there with you?”

“No, Maude, Henry died last year, I'm surprised you didn't know.”

“You're not in the house, are you?”

“No, I'm standing just outside the front door.”

“My advice is to go to a neighbor's until the officers arrive,” Maude instructed. “The intruder may still be in the house. Do you have a car you can lock yourself inside temporarily?”

“I have a car, but it’s in the garage, and I can’t reach it without going into the house.”

“Move closer to the street. The police officers are on their way and will be there in five minutes. I'll stay on the line until they arrive.”

“Thanks, Maude, I hope this is not a wild goose chase,” Agnes said timidly. “When I returned from my evening walk, I found the front door open, and it gave me a fright.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Maude said, trying to put her at ease. “The policemen will be happy to check out your house, regardless. Stay calm. Did you see any sign of a break-in?”

“Not really, but I only took a quick look inside.”

“I understand. You can't be too careful these days, especially with the Boogeyman still at large.”

“The Boogeyman?” Agnes asked, clueless.

“Certainly you must know about the Boogeyman, that’s

what the media calls him. He's strangled eight elderly women in their homes over the last eight months. The whole town is buzzing about him. Don't you read the paper or watch TV. No sane woman over fifty would leave her home after dark with that madman on the loose."

"I don't watch the news," Agnes confessed, "it upsets me… and I don't get a paper. I love movies, and that's all I watch. I get them from Netflix."

"I don't mean to scare you, but each of the murders occurred on the last day of the month. Today is March 31, and, as far as we know, the Boogeyman hasn't strangled anyone yet, and It's only four hours till midnight."

"Eight women?" Agnes thought, "she remembered Gertrude, her bridge partner, talking about some murders several times, but somehow she imagined the victims were young women. She couldn't remember any serial killer targeting older women in any TV show or movie she's ever seen. She never once thought her life could be in danger, and like a fool, she was walking two miles after dark every night.

In the distance, she saw the lights of a fast car approaching and was relieved when the police car pulled into her driveway.

"The officers are here now," Agnes said, starting to breathe easier. "Thanks for staying on the line with me."

"You're safe now, but my advice to you is to forget your movies from Netflix and keep up with the current news, at least, until they catch the Boogeyman. After all, you are exactly the kind of person he chooses for a victim. I have to go now. I've got another call. Good luck." Agnes returned the phone to her pocket and walked toward the cruiser.

A tall mountain of the man in the blue uniform got out of the driver's seat and approached her with another much shorter officer, who followed behind him from the other side of the Crown Vic.

"Are you Mrs. Schwartz?" the tall officer asked in a peculiar accent that sounded like he had a mouthful of

marbles.

“Yes, I’m the one who called,” Agnes admitted nervously.

“I'm Officer Danielson, and this is my partner, Officer Johnson. I understand you may have had a break-in?”

“When I returned from my walk, I found the front door not only unlocked, but open. I’m 99% sure I locked it when I left, and I had never left the door unlocked in the ten years I’ve lived here,” Agnes explained. “I reached in and turned on the light, but considering someone might still be inside, I decided to call 911.”

“You did the right thing,” Danielson said, stepping from the shadows into the front porch light.

Agnes did a double take when she saw the officer's enormous hands holding a medium-sized notepad in his palm like a playing card. Looking up, it was all Agnes could do not to scream when she saw his ghastly misshapen face riddled with patches of scar tissue. To gather her composure, she quickly turned toward Johnson, who remained partially obscured in shadow.

“You should never enter the house after a break-in until we make sure the perp is no longer inside,” Danielson continued.

Agnes decided he had a speech impediment rather than a foreign accent, and keeping her eyes riveted on his partner, remained silent.

“Sit in our patrol car while we inspect the property,” Johnson said firmly, as he unhooked the leather strap from his holster.

Following instructions, Agnes went to the cruiser and climbed into the back seat. She watched the officers draw their guns and stealthily enter the house.

As she sat there, she realized Danielson looked a lot like Grendel Ogre, a weird-looking man who played a human monster in several black and white movies that had scared

the wits out of her in the fifties. She couldn't keep her hands from trembling as she watched the lights go on all over the house.

Twenty minutes later, the officers came out the front door. Danielson moved around the right of the house, and Johnson disappeared into the backyard to the left.

In another five minutes, with their firearms holstered, they returned to the patrol car, and she met them in the driveway.

"Well, Mrs. Schwartz," Danielson mumbled, barely understandable, "we checked everything, and we couldn't find any sign of a forced entry."

Johnson piped in, "On the surface, everything inside seemed fine, but, of course, if something was stolen, only you would really know it. All we can say is there is no one hiding in the house now, and you can go back in without any fear."

"Thank you so much," Agnes said, fixing her eyes on Johnson and moving toward the front door. "I'm sorry if this was a false alarm, but when I found the door open, I was frightened."

"No need to keep apologizing, we don't blame you for being frightened with the Boogeyman still on the prowl," Johnson said, writing something in his notebook.

"Since I don't get a paper and rarely watch TV, I didn't even think of the Boogeyman when I found the door open."

"Really…" Johnson said, turning to Danielson with a look of disbelief, "he's the first one you should've thought of. You know it's the last day of the month, and if he follows his profile, he'll strangle someone by midnight."

A cold shiver ran up Agnes' spine, and she felt an odd lump in her throat when she thought of the black tongue protruding from the mouth of one of the strangler's victims in Hitchcock's movie, *Frenzy*. A weak smile forced the horrific image from her mind, and looking between the two men to avoid eye contact with Danielson, she said, "Well, thanks

again. I promise I'll be a lot more careful from here on out, and I'll watch the news every day."

Both officers smiled and turned toward their patrol car. Danielson paused and looked back as if he wanted to say something. Agnes pretended not to notice and turned toward the front door.

From the porch, Agnes watched the officers get in their car and pull away. She hoped Danielson had not detected her inability to look him in the eye, and her intense mortal fear of him. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she knew his appearance had to be a terrible problem for him each time he met at new person. Johnson must be a saint to agree to partner with someone who looked like a movie monster in real life. She closed the front door and double locked it.

Entering the study, Agnes unlocked the center drawer of her large mahogany desk and took out her 38 Special revolver. After checking to be sure it was loaded, she felt a lot safer that she was no longer defenseless. If the Boogeyman came to her house, he would be sorry. She was a crack shot, and could shoot the eye out of a hummingbird at thirty paces. "Well, maybe not thirty," she thought, and chuckled weakly.

It was only nine o'clock, and she never turned in until at least eleven. Her adrenalin was still pumping, and she didn't feel like watching a movie. She went into the living room and took a seat on the sofa in front of the television. Placing the 38 on the end table, she recounted what had happened in the covered bridge and afterward along the path. She thought of the gaping front door and Danielson's horrible misshapen face and his eerie way of speaking. She couldn't get the vision of his huge, meaty hands out of her mind, and could almost feel them gripping her neck.

An unfamiliar sound at the back of the house piqued her senses. Turning, she cringed when she saw that one of the officers had left the curtains on the slider completely open. If anyone was in the backyard, they could be watching her every move. She jumped up, and moving quickly to the back wall of glass, she pulled the cord and closed the curtains. Returning

to the sofa, she turned off the lamp on the end table and sat in the dark. Everything around her seemed strange as she kept replaying the night's events over in her mind like a scary movie. She wondered if the Boogeyman had strangled someone yet.

An hour later, the chime of the front doorbell sounded and startled her awake. For a few moments, Agnes sat frozen in fear. No one had come to her door at this hour in years. She struggled for the strength to rise from the sofa. Running the marathon in her current state was out of the question. She had never felt so drained of energy as she picked up the revolver and tiptoed toward the foyer. When the doorbell chimed a second time, she peeked around the ficus tree, and tried to catch a glimpse of the person at the door through the side panel.

In the dim light from the street lamp, she saw the haggard face of Danielson pressed against the glass and covering her mouth, she was barely able to stifle a scream. His face rekindled the nightmare that had plagued her as a little girl after seeing Grendel Ogre strangle a poor woman in that horrible old movie. There was no way in Hell she would open the door for him.

Why had Danielson changed from his uniform into street clothes? Why had he not called her first if he had a question or had forgotten something? Was the Boogeyman at her front door?

Suddenly, she heard the voice that made her blood run cold only a few inches from her throat just behind the door, "Hello, Mrs. Schwartz. This is Officer Danielson. I tried to call you, but your phone's not working. Are you all right? My partner thought he may have forgotten to lock the slider, and he asked me to check it out."

Agnes was shaking so badly, she feared she would bite her tongue off if she tried to speak. She remained silent and firmly plastered against the wall in a cold sweat. After ringing the doorbell two more times, she heard Danielson step away from the front porch. Peeking through the glass, she saw him

disappear from view to the right.

Why did he come back? Was he here as a concerned police officer or was he the Boogeyman, here to strangle the life out of her before midnight.

In a few moments, she heard Danielson's voice calling to her from the back porch, "Mrs. Schwartz, if you're here, please answer me. I need to know you're all right."

After several more knocks on the slider and repeated pleas for her to answer, it was all she could do keep her sanity when she heard the slider open in the breakfast nook. Danielson's weird voice called to her from inside the house, "Mrs. Schwartz. I don't want to frighten you, but my partner asked me to be sure he locked the slider. It's a good thing I did, because he was right. He did leave it unlocked. I tried to call ahead, but your phone is out-of-order. I can't turn on the light because the electricity is off. Please, tell me you're all right so I can go home.

Was the electricity really off in her house? She could see the streetlight burning brightly through the side panel of the front door and lights were on in the Jenkins house across the street. Then, Agnes saw the flat nose and the cauliflower ears coming ever closer as one big eye hung in the light of the street lamp and seemed to leer at her with lethal intent. Was she still dreaming, or was Danielson dragging one foot as he shambled closer to where she was hiding? She saw his mouthful of crooked teeth spread into a monstrous grin, and his protruding eyeballs bulge with recognition when he spotted her shaking in terror on the floor.

"Mrs. Schwartz, why didn't you answer me when…?" Danielson saw the 38 Special emerge from the shadows and raised his hands in submission as he recoiled slowly backwards. The crooked smile vanished from his shocked, misshapen face.

"Please leave now or I'll shoot," Agnes warned him.

"Take it easy, I'm just trying to help you," the officer stammered, "I live close by and…."

“Can’t you see how terrified I am,” Agnes shrieked. “With an hour left before midnight, I don't trust anyone at this point. Leave now before my nerves make me do something both of us will regret. It's not your fault, but you remind me of a monster I had in a nightmare when I was a little girl, and I’m deathly afraid of you. Even if you have good intentions, I can’t control the fear I’m feeling right now.”

“Sorry. I was in a fire when I was little. I was just worried…”

“Please, leave now!” Agnes shrieked. “I won't tell you again.”

Danielson paused a beat, then turned and walked briskly to the back and left through the slider without another word.

Agnes didn’t move until she saw the headlights and heard his car pull away from the driveway. She closed the slider, locked it, and pulled the drapes across the creepy darkness in the backyard. Her heart was still beating fast, and her entire body was still shaking. She shuddered at the thought she had almost shot a police officer because he reminded her of Grendel Ogre, an actor who played in an old movie a long time ago.

She picked up the phone, and verified the line was dead. She tried the light switch to confirm the electricity was off. “I guess he was telling the truth after all,” she thought. “What a night of weird circumstances,” she said to the darkness.

She extracted her phone from her pocket and saw the time was 11:30. From the top drawer of the chest in the foyer, she found a flashlight. Turning it on, she was elated the batteries still worked. Totally exhausted, she climbed the stairs, still gripping the 38 for insurance and pointing the beam of the light into the darkness above. She knew she would never be able to sleep, but she had to try. She could barely put one foot in front of the other when she reached the landing.

After brushing her teeth and putting on her nightgown, she fell into bed and placed the gun on the end table and the

flashlight beside her on the bedspread. She wondered if the Boogeyman had found his ninth victim yet. The beam of the light was diminishing from weak batteries, but the dim glow was a small comfort as she fixed her eyes on a small speck of dried blood on the ceiling from a fly she swatted the year she moved in.

As Agnes lay there praying for sleep to come, a sudden realization of horror gripped her like a vice and had her gasping for breath again. Scared half out of her wits and wanting the giant policeman to leave immediately, she forgot all about the back slider being unlocked. If Danielson wasn't the Boogeyman, the real one had plenty of time to sneak in the back door when she sat in the cruiser.

At once, everything around her seemed ominous and threatening. To make matters worse, the flashlight went out entirely. Her eyes flitted back and forth in the darkness like a scared rabbit, dwelling on every shadow in the room, straining to detect the slightest foreign sound or movement.

What if it was the Bogeyman in the bridge, and he really did follow her home? Or maybe he was the young man who blew his horn as he passed in the car. He might have turned around and followed her. Maybe the Boogeyman left the door open when he came to strangle her and then waited in the backyard when he found her gone. With a sudden burst of adrenalin, Agnes grabbed the revolver from the end table, sprang to her feet, and tried the light switch on the wall.

The electricity was still off as she expected it would be. She crept to the door and peered out, ever listening to the silence for movement. Her fear accelerated when she still saw the street light and several porch lights on across the street through the bedroom window. Why was her house the only one without electricity? This couldn't be a coincidence; the Boogeyman had obviously chosen her as his next victim, and he was somewhere in the house. Everything pointed to this gut-wrenching conclusion.

Peering into the eerie blackness of the lower level from the top of the stairs, Agnes knew it was futile and probably suicide, even with her revolver, to leave her bedroom without a light. She knew her pounding heart would explode from

fright if she really saw the Boogeyman step from the shadows.

She slammed the bedroom door, locked it, and propped a chair under the doorknob. The battery powered clock on the end table read 11:45 when she climbed into bed, trembling with unbridled fear. Placing the revolver next to the clock, she rested her head on a mound of pillows and strained to make out the speck of fly on the ceiling she could no longer see. Maybe tomorrow she would get the ladder and take care of it.

Turning on her side, she watched the digits turning slowly over as each minute passing seemed like an eternity. The room felt as cold as a tomb.

At 11:55, she felt something move beneath her. It was the last place in the house she would have checked.

Then came the loud “achoo” from under the bed like a giant fart breaking the silence of a somber wake.

Agnes lunged for the revolver that had disappeared from the table as a hand as big as a catcher’s mitt clutched her throat and started squeezing. The Boogeyman had a deadline to meet, and he had to work fast.

New Year's Resolutions

Every New Year's Eve since they graduated from college seven years ago, Ben and his friends, Frank, Murray, and Harold, met at the Purple Puma Lounge to make resolutions for the coming year.

In keeping with their annual custom, they were well on their way toward inebriation when Frank proposed the theme for this year.

"Did you guys see the movie, *The Bucket List*"?" Frank asked, and then belched.

"Yeah, I saw it," Harold replied. "It was damned good." Ben nodded in agreement, and watched a busty coed swivel

by on her way to the ladies' room.

Murray shook his head and said with disdain, "Everybody said how great it was, and I wanted to see it, but somehow I never did."

"One of the first things Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman decided to do before they kicked the bucket was to go skydiving," Frank replied. "Ever since I was a kid, I've had a bad case of acrophobia, the fear of high places. So…I'm making skydiving my New Year's resolution for this year, and I propose we make a pact that each of us will eliminate something from our own personal bucket list this year we never thought we'd have the balls to do."

His friends looked at each other in dumbfounded amazement at this unexpected proposal to go skydiving.

Frank saw the shocked expressions on his friends' faces and continued, "After years of not being able to go on an airplane because of my fear of heights, I've decided not only to go up in a plane, but I'm going to jump out of one. I've been to a shrink, and he says I'm ready."

"Skydiving," Ben said, pounding on the bar and laughing so hard, he couldn't catch his breath. "You'd better pick an alternative resolution, dear friend. Something you might actually go through with when you're sober."

"Yeah, Frank." Harold chided, "Ever since you almost fell off the barn roof when you were ten, you've had trouble taking an elevator above the fifth floor."

"Not anymore," Frank said with determination. "I'm a new man. Come down to the airfield on January 2 and watch me go airborne at over 5,000 feet."

"I've got $100 that says you won't make the jump," Murray declared drunkenly.

The three of them teased Frank mercilessly about his insane idea of going skydiving the rest of the evening. No one thought he would actually go through with it.

That is, until they arrived at the small airport on that cold January morning. Frank looked like a little kid with a new toy, grinning from ear to ear in his blue helmet that looked much too big for his head.

Once the plane took off, and Frank was in the air, the

three of them stopped laughing and stood spellbound as they watched the small aircraft get smaller and smaller as it climbed higher and higher into the sky.

After a time, Harold, whose nickname was Hawkeye because he had the best vision of the four of them, said, “Shit, I think he just jumped out of the plane. At least, someone did.”

Ben couldn’t see what Harold was seeing; he had the poorest vision of the four. Biting his fingernail into the quick, he shouted, “What’s happening now?”

“He must have pulled the ripcord! The chute is spiraling downward,” Harold screamed above the roar of another plane taking off.

“I don’t know much about parachuting, but I don’t think you’re supposed to pull the ripcord that soon,” Murray said, in a worried tone.

“Oh, no!” Harold squealed at the top of his lungs.

“What?” Ben shouted.

“The chute didn’t open. It looks like a giant streamer trailing behind him. He’s freefalling,” Harold shouted.

Murray said, trying to stay calm. “He’ll be okay. I read all about it on the Internet last night. Frank has a backup chute. If the primary doesn’t open, he’ll release it, and once it’s out of the way, he’ll manually pull out the backup on his stomach and let it fly.”

“Oh, no!“ Harold shrieked.

“What?” Murray and Ben asked in unison, squinting into the blinding sun.

“He didn’t release the first parachute, and the backup is wrapping around it.”

They stood there in horror, listening to Frank’s gut wrenching scream as he neared the ground. He landed not far away with a bone-crushing thump in a sickening, heap of blood and guts, topped with a blue helmet. Ben would never forget that scream if he lived a thousand years.

It was bitter cold the morning Frank was buried. Snow had covered the cemetery during the night. The three of them had volunteered to be pallbearers, but Harold didn’t show up, and someone else they barely knew had taken his place.

Even before he entered the church for the funeral

service, Ben had planned to sit as far back as possible. He did not intend to go up front to view Frank's body in the coffin, but when he stepped inside, he caught a glimpse of his friend in the casket before he could turn away.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't seen the body. Murray said it would give him closure, and make him feel better. Ben would always regret listening to this nonsense. He was convinced that dead people never look the way they did when they were alive, and this proved it.

At first glance, from where he sat, Ben thought Frank's hair was combed like Elvis. After a pause, he groaned to Murray and the other person in the pew, "Why does his face look so puffy?"

The stranger seated next to Murray whispered, "The mortician probably stuffed too much cotton in his mouth. It's surprising he looks this good after falling from an airplane."

Another person next to him, talking through his hand said, "There wouldn't have been an open casket if Frank's fall hadn't been broken by the pine boughs he fell through on the way down. If he'd hit the ground, he'd just be a stew of blood and guts."

"Please, the children," an obese woman hissed. Afterward, everyone around him went silent.

Ben hated the way his friend looked. The undertaker had twisted a ridiculous smile on Frank's face that reminded him of the Joker's Cheshire cat grin in a Batman comic. What a mistake. Now, he would remember Frank looking like a clown in the coffin rather than the way he looked the last time he'd seen him, which was inebriated and happy.

After the ceremony at the cemetery, Ben and Murray received the unbelievable news that Harold had driven his SUV through a guardrail and crashed in a ball of fire at the bottom of a cliff. An eyewitness told police there was no one else in the car. Later that night, the police told Ben and Murray, it appeared to be a suicide. They wondered if Frank's death had pushed him over the edge.

Five days later, Ben and Murray attended Harold's funeral. The injuries sustained in the crash did not allow for an open casket ceremony, which suited Ben just fine.

In February, Murray informed Ben he had decided to go through with his New Year's resolution, which was to spend the night in a haunted house. Murray never went to horror movies when he was growing up and had bad dreams when he watched spooky shows on TV. All the kids had made fun of him and called him a sissy when he wouldn't go with them to a scary movie.

Murray always said he envied people who were unaffected by horror movies, haunted houses, things that go bump in the night, and he wanted to be one of them. To finally quell his phobia, he had been going to the same shrink Frank had hired.

Just before Christmas, after extensive hypnosis sessions and passing a series of tests, Murray's therapist, a Doctor Winthrop, advised him he was cured, and he would never have the phobia again. To prove it, Murray had already decided to spend the night at the Schram House; a legendary mansion with a dark history that all the old timers said was haunted.

After the last appointment with the shrink, Murray had called Ben and asked him to meet for drinks at the Purple Puma at seven o'clock the night following his stay at Schram House to celebrate.

On the night they'd planned to meet, Ben arrived early and was already one drink ahead when the bar clock on the wall read seven. After another drink, when Murray didn't show and didn't call, Ben called him, and it automatically went to the message center. After stopping by his apartment and finding Murray wasn't there, he had an eerie feeling something bad may have happened at the Schram house.

Ben didn't believe in ghosts or haunted houses, but going to the Schram mansion at night by himself was something he would never do. Nonetheless, he didn't want to wait until morning to find out what happened to Murray. In desperation, he called a friend of his father's, Matt Hawkins, who was now the local sheriff. He hoped he might do him a favor and go with him to look for Murray if he wasn't too busy. Sure enough, Matt agreed to meet him at the Schram house in a half hour.

Ben shuddered when he saw the spooky house in the distance at the end of a lonely road. As he approached the large menacing structure he'd always heard was over 150 years old, he saw the yard surrounding the dilapidated monstrosity was a tangle of overgrown weeds and gnarled trees. Behind the discolored picket fence at the back of the property, he saw a graveyard with leaning headstones of all shapes and sizes. A low-lying mist crept along the ground around the twenty-bedroom shell that had been falling apart for over twenty years.

As he pulled into the driveway bordering the expansive front porch, Ben noticed most of the windowpanes were missing or broken. The huge front door squeaked eerily back and forth on rusty hinges like a black portal into Hell. The gaping void seemed to beckon him as he sat with raw nerves in his car and waited for Matt to arrive. A bitter cold wind moaned through the cracks and crevasses of the ominous facade.

Everyone who lived in the vicinity knew that the last owner, Philip Bartholomew, had hacked his wife and children to pieces before he disappeared and was never heard from again. To add to the gruesome legend of the Schram residence, the family before the Bartholomew's met a grisly death at the hands of a mental patient who had escaped from the Rothschild asylum. The deranged maniac had chained up the husband, wife, and two children, and hacking off one limb at a time, had made a meal of them for three months.

Knowing Murray's fear of scary places, Ben could not imagine him coming here alone after dark and was totally shocked when he saw his friend's Mustang parked in front of the house. He pulled behind it, locked his own doors and windows, and continued to wait for Matt to arrive. He didn't see Murray in his car, but he didn't want to take a closer look by himself.

Finally, he saw the lights of another car coming up the driveway and was happy to see it was Matt Hawkins. Ben met the Sheriff in the yard.

Matt pointed his flashlight into the gloom and said, "You say Murray said he was going to spend the night here last

night?"

"That's right, Matt. He'd been going to a shrink, and this was supposed to be the conclusive test that his phobia had been cured."

They went to look inside Murray's car. It was locked, but peering through the driver's side window, they saw nothing suspicious.

They also inspected the other side, and finding nothing unusual proceeded to the front door of the eerie mansion. They looked at each other, dreading what came next. Their faces were as white as a sheet as they approached the ominous structure. Matt inhaled a lung full of air, and they went in.

Immediately, the beam of his flashlight illuminated the hideous face of Murray sitting in a large armchair directly in front of the front door. Both wrists were slashed, and two large pools of dried blood had accumulated on the floor. His throat was cut from ear to ear, and a straight razor lay open on his lap. His white shirt was soaked with blood from the neck wound. The worse part was seeing the expression on Murray's face. He looked like he had seen the devil himself. The Sheriff called for the coroner and the paramedics.

"What do you think? Is this a suicide or a murder?" Ben asked.

Matt hesitated, and after a time replied, "There's nothing here that suggests anything more than suicide. Murray could have sliced his wrists and his throat before he bled out, but the coroner might find something suspicious when he does the autopsy."

"I can't imagine Murray killing himself, but I never thought Harold would either, yet, three people saw him drive his car off the cliff."

Just like the memory of Frank's death scream, if Ben lived another thousand years, he would never forget the look on Murray's face.

Matt said grimly, "I've seen some pretty grisly things in my time. Murders, mutilations, bad auto accident victims, but I've never seen a look on a dead person's face like this. What in hell did the poor bastard think he saw when he was hacking

and slicing himself to death with the straight razor. He should have put a gun in his mouth and blown his brains out rather than go through all this."

"Murray didn't own a gun," Ben replied blankly, shaking his head, and trying to hold back the tears. "I didn't know he owned a straight razor either for that matter."

Matt started inspecting the rest of the crime scene, and making notes on a pad he withdrew from his shirt pocket, he aid, shaking his head, "That shrink must have been out of his mind to tell Murray to spend the night in this place."

"It was Edgar Winthrop who gave him the okay, and he's the most highly respected psychiatrist in the state as far as I know. I've never heard anyone say a negative thing about him. He has successfully helped God knows how many people not only in the state, but also in the country.

"His reputation is excellent all right," the sheriff added. "In fact, my wife went to him when she had some issues that troubled her after her mother died."

After another two hours with the rescue squad, the coroner, and the police, Ben headed toward his car to leave. As he approached the Murray's Mustang, he saw something shiny underneath in the headlights. Stooping down, he picked up a large silver coin. Matt, who was talking with some men on the porch, saw him and came over to see what he'd found. Ben showed him the coin and asked, "Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"You know I think I did see a coin like this somewhere, but I can't place where," Matt said, turning it over and looking at the other side. "When it comes to me, and I think it will, I'll call you."

Ben left Matt with the coroner and his crew, and stopped at a bar for a few Cuervo shots to settle his nerves before he went home. Now, all three of his best friends were dead. As he sat there getting wasted, he couldn't get the look on Murray's face out of his mind.

* * *

Six days later, Ben attended the funeral for Murray. At the gravesite, he ran into Matt and told him about the terrible nightmares he'd been having every night since the death of

his friends. The Sheriff advised him to make an appointment with Dr. Winthrop before he had a breakdown or something worse.

When he finally decided to call, he couldn't get an appointment with the esteemed doctor for two weeks. In the meantime, Matt had called to tell him they had closed the files on the deaths of his three fiends, which the authorities concluded were suicides.

* * *

Finally, the day of the appointment came after two weeks of sleepless nights. When Ben approached the mammoth dwelling perched on a hill overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, he felt sad that he would probably never enjoy living in a luxurious place like this himself. Winthrop was one of the richest and most respected doctors in the state. Many thought he might run for the senate as a stepping-stone to the Presidency.

Sitting in the parking lot, he thought of taking off, but someone inside saw him pull into the driveway. Leaving now would be embarrassing, and he'd probably have to pay for the session anyway.

The left side of the mansion was dedicated to the psychiatric practice. He saw the sign and followed the elaborate, stone walkway with views of the ocean. Opening the door with stained glass insets, he went into a large vestibule.

The waiting area was not like the typical doctor's office. Several expensive paintings covered two of the walls to the left and right. The wall in front of several sets of plush, beige chairs and a large teak coffee table was lined with degrees and awards. A floor to ceiling aquarium with tropical fish covered the front wall. There was no sign-in sheet.

Before Ben could take a seat, a young woman in a designer suit appeared in the doorway and greeted him, "Dr. Winthrop will be with you shortly. Please have a seat. Would you care for a latte, espresso, regular coffee, or tea?"

"I'd like a latte, please." Ben replied. He'd never had a latte, and thought he'd try one."

He took a seat, and in a short time, the woman brought

him a steaming latte in an antique cup and a form to fill out to provide his medical history and personal information. She smiled warmly and left the room. Sipping the heavenly brew, Ben noticed one large plaque listed Winthrop as one of the top ten psychiatrists in the United States for the fifth year in a row.

After five minutes elapsed, the woman returned, retrieved the forms he'd filled out, and led him into the doctor's office. The room had a sofa, a love seat, and two armchairs situated in front of a massive desk with a wall full of leather-bound books.

Ben took a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs. After several more minutes elapsed, the door opened to the left, and Dr. Winthrop entered and took his seat behind the desk.

"Hello, Ben. I understand from your form, you've been troubled with severe nightmares."

"Yes, every night for the past month, I wake up screaming with my tee-shirt drenched with sweat. My primary physician gave me several medications to calm my nerves and to help me sleep, but none of them helped at all."

"Who is your primary physician?"

"Dr. Joseph McCabe."

"I know Joe very well. We play a round of golf now and then. So… you say the nightmares started about a month ago."

"Yes, I remember precisely, it all began on February 25, which was a Sunday."

"Do you have any idea what could be causing your nightmares?"

"I believe they have something to do with the death of my three closest friends, and the resolutions we made on New Year's Eve. Strangely enough, each of us had a phobia that plagued us all of our lives, and we made a pact to overcome them this year. In response to that, two of my friends began therapy with you, and as far as I know, you cured both of them in a very short time."

"Are you referring to Frank Jessup, Murray Abrams, and Harold Carmichael?"

“Yes, those are my three friends, but as far as I know, only Frank and Murray were patients of yours.”

Winthrop started to say something, but remained silent while Ben continued, “As you know, Frank wanted to prove his fear of flying was over by going skydiving. The three of us bet him $100 he wouldn’t go through with it. We lost the bet, and we also lost him as a friend when he opened his backup chute too soon and fell to his death.”

“I saw it in the paper, and couldn’t believe it. I consider curing Frank of his problem one of my greatest achievements.”

“It’s amazing what you accomplished with Frank in such a short time and tragic that it led to his untimely death.”

“I assume Murray was another friend who met an unfortunate end.”

“Yes, Murray’s death, although considered by the authorities to be a suicide, troubles me. That’s part of the reason I wanted to talk with you.”

“I’m sorry, Ben, but I really can’t discuss another patient’s confidential information. I can only try to offer a solution for your own personal problem.”

“I understand, I guess. I hoped you might shed some light on the suicide. Apparently, you did cure Murray of his phobia, and he wanted to prove it by spending the night at the Schram house alone after dark. I’ll never understand why he wanted to do such a crazy thing. I don’t know anyone, including me, that would go there at night by themselves.”

Ben paused to control the flood of emotion building as he spoke about the loss of his dear friend, and then continued, “When Murray didn’t meet me for drinks like we’d planned, I called the Sheriff, a long-time friend of my father’s, to meet me there. I arrived first and waited for the Sheriff before I got out of my car. Do you know about the background of the Schram house?”

“I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never been there.”

“Do you have any idea why Murray would commit suicide in such a creepy place? If he thought he was cured, why would he bring a straight razor with him?”

“I have no idea. It makes no sense. He was entirely

cured the last time he was here for therapy."

"Did you say Harold Carmichael was also a patient?"

"Yes, I worked with Harold for an extended period on a problem that plagued him for most of his life."

"Wow! That's so strange. I went drinking with Harold every Friday night for years, and he never mentioned it. None of us ever suspected he had a phobia until New Year's Eve, and even then, he didn't say what it was."

"As I said, I'm not at liberty to discuss his personal affairs. Do you want to tell me about your nightmares?"

"Of course. I'm sorry I got sidetracked, but my nightmares are all about the death of my three friends. They keep speaking to me every night in my dreams."

"What do they say?"

"They say they were murdered."

"Murdered? The paper said three eyewitnesses saw Harold drive his car off a cliff. Frank made a fatal mistake on his first attempt at skydiving, and Murray slit his wrists and his throat by his own hand. The authorities concluded all three death's were suicides, and there was no evidence anyone else was involved."

"That's what they concluded, but my friends say they were murdered. Every night they come to me pleading for revenge. I haven't had a wink of sleep for weeks. I can't bear it any longer. Can you offer a solution?"

"I find that the most effective cure for sleep deprivation is through hypnotism. Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"Never."

"We can try it and see if it helps."

"Before we start, can I ask what the stack of silver coins on your desk are for?"

"I use them when I hypnotize a patient. In fact, you are about to see one of them now."

Winthrop opened a desk drawer, took out a black box, and placed it on the desktop. Reaching back behind his chair, he flipped a switch, and an intense laser beam crossed the plane of the mahogany surface.

"I place the coins in this box, and each time I push this red button on top, it releases a spinning silver coin into the

laser beam. In seconds, by having the patient focus on the coin, I can hypnotize him with a few well-chosen words. Let me give you a demonstration."

Winthrop pushed the red button, and a coin spun onto the table into the laser beam. Ben turned away and didn't look at the coin.

Looking at Winthrop and avoiding the light, he said, "I've seen a coin like this before."

Really? One of my clients stole one a few weeks ago. I have one empty space in the container. Where did you see it?"

"I found it on the ground next to Murray's car at the Schram house."

"I never thought of Murray as a thief."

"I can guarantee Murray didn't take your coin," Ben said firmly."

"If he didn't take it, how did it get there?"

"I suspect you dropped it the night you murdered Murray and made it look like a suicide. He told me you tried to hypnotize him several times, but he was one of those rare people, it wouldn't work on."

Winthrop's stern expression morphed into a cruel smile as he reclined further back in his chair and said gleefully, "Murray's fear was too great to put one foot in any haunted house, much less the Schram House. On the night in question, I gave him a mild sedative, which allowed me to finally put him under. After that, he obeyed my every command."

"You also made Frank make the mistake with his chute…and you made Harold drive off the cliff."

Frank didn't know he was in a plane when he stepped out of it at 5,000 feet, and Harold thought he was playing a video came when he drove off the cliff. I confess," Winthrop exclaimed, brimming with accomplishment, "I killed them all."

He turned and looked at Ben with a sheepish grin. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Remember you? From where?"

"From our college days." Winthrop explained, "We lived together in the same fraternity back then. Do you recall the

name Charlie Bolton?"

"Charlie Bolton. Yes, I remember Charlie well. He was the pledge we buried alive on Hell night. I'll never forget his face when we finally found the gravesite where we buried him and opened the casket. But, you don't look like Charlie at all."

"Plastic surgery can do a lot," Winthrop said, moving closer to Ben so he could see him better. "I don't even recognize myself when I look in the mirror. In addition, I combed my hair like Elvis back then, and I didn't have a mustache. I also wore horn rimmed glasses instead of contacts."

"So this is what it's all about. Revenge for a college prank that went wrong."

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be buried alive for fifteen hours?"

"I knew when we rescued you, you'd lost it. But we were all drunk when we buried you, and none of us could remember which cemetery it was let alone which grave we put you in. There were thousands of cemetery plots covered by leaves from a windstorm the same night. Thank God, we had 500 volunteers searching. It was nobody's fault; we didn't mean to do it."

"Do you know how long I was in the asylum?"

"I'm sorry. I never really heard. After they took you away, we never knew what happened to you. We tried to find out, but the Dean and his staff wouldn't talk to us. They wanted to keep it under wraps because of the bad publicity."

"For five hellish years, I had deranged perverts holding me down while they took turns brutalizing me."

Ben did see a likeness in Winthrop's psychotic facial features that reminded him of Charlie Bolton when they opened the coffin as he recoiled away from the deranged maniac.

Winthrop shrieked, "There were eight of you who took part in driving me mad, and you are the last. After tonight, the New Year's resolution I made fifteen years ago will be fulfilled."

"You crazy fuck! You're nuts, and you're going to pay for killing my friends and the others." Ben heard the words he had

just said, but it sounded like he was in a wind tunnel when he said them. His mind was suddenly very cloudy.

"No, Ben, like I said, it's your time to die. You should be feeling a bit drowsy from the latte by now. I told my receptionist she could leave early so I could have you all to myself."

"The latte?" Ben muttered in a hazy stupor. He felt very tired. So tired, he could barely keep his eyes open.

Winthrop pushed the red button, and another coin sped into the light and began to pulsate in his vision. Ben tried to resist it, but his eyes were drawn to it until he could focus on nothing else. Then, with the last vestige of his strength, he pushed the button on the transmitter in his pocket and cried out, "It's time for the cavalry."

Winthrop ignored the remark and continued to speak in a whisper, "The only thing you can hear is the sound of my voice and no one else. Do you understand?"

"Yes…only your voice," Ben answered.

Suddenly the outer door burst open, and three men pushing sixty years old bounded into the room, grabbed Winthrop, and wrestled him to the carpet. One of the men started wrapping duct tape around his wrists and ankles while another stuffed some rags in his mouth and placed another band around his head to cover his mouth.

The other man helped Ben to his feet and placed smelling salts under his nose to revive him. Finally, he drifted back into consciousness, and pointing to Winthrop, said, "This is the monster that murdered your sons and my dearest friends."

Winthrop's face contorted with fear when he saw the unbridled hatred in the eyes of his captors. He wriggled on the floor trying desperately to free himself until one of the men kicked him in the head, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When Winthrop opened his eyes and saw nothing but blackness, he knew exactly where the men had left him. He threw out his hands and battered his knuckles against the unmovable surface only inches above him.

He started screaming, but the noise inside the crude pine box was so maddening he couldn't bear it. He started to

sob, knowing unlike the last time, no one would be coming to rescue him this time.

Jowls

Like many of the affluent players in the Big Apple, John Broadback, founding partner of the law firm, Broadback, Hodgekiss, and Rangoon, spent the last two weeks of August at his retreat in the Adirondacks. In the circular complex of buildings, a large A-frame was the focal point of the property nestled deep in a beautiful forest.

Pouring his wife her second Grey Goose martini, John settled in his oversized hammock with his third Jack Daniels on the rocks. “Hodgekiss thought I was crazy when I told him this CD of mating calls would bring flocks of owls to our back porch.”

Taking a sip, Martha replied, “I wish I had a picture of his face when he saw them swooping in from all directions.”

After a good-natured chuckle, they immediately perceived a weird stillness creep over the landscape around

the towering structure. Then from the underbrush, they heard a high-pitched howl that didn't seem far away. Chills ran up their spines as the shrill, eerie cry grew louder and alarmingly closer.

"What on earth is that?" Martha stammered.

John rose from the hammock and peered into the woods. "I've never heard anything so creepy in my life."

Their eyes flitted back and forth across the wooded landscape. Martha was the first to see the enormous black shape emerging from the undergrowth and bounding toward them with gigantic leaps. John struggled from the unsteady hammock to get to his feet as Martha dropped her martini and bolted toward the sliding glass doors shouting, "Get inside the house!"

John's bulk hampered his attempt to reach the sliders before the enormous jaws of the beast clamped on his right ankle and snapped it in a single bite like a dry twig. The humongous doglike thing the size of a small pony went immediately for Broadback's neck and ripped his throat out. Martha stood behind the glass, but couldn't bear to watch the savage attack on her beloved husband of thirty years. Pulling the curtains, she picked up the phone to call 911, but to her horror, she found the line was dead.

The enormous wolfhound's ears pricked upwards when it heard a whistle too high for a human to discern and immediately bolted from the deck and returned to the woods. The mammoth beast that weighed over 200 pounds followed the beckoning sound to a white van parked about a quarter of a mile away from the Broadback retreat. It leapt inside the rear doors that stood open and settled on a large tarp covering the floor of the van and licked at the blood and gore matted on his thick coat of fur.

Alex Cooper, former vice president of the Broadback, Hodgekiss, and Rangoon law firm, flipped a switch on the dash, and the rear doors slid shut. There was no turning back. Phase 1 of his plan of revenge for his termination from the firm after thirty-one years of service had begun. The Partners had promised him a full partnership many times, but each year found a different excuse to postpone his promotion. The

crowning blow came when he and his wife, Gail, were dining at the Rainbow Room and overheard the three of them discussing with fits of uncontrolled laughter how they had used him all those years. It was clear from their remarks they had never planned on promoting him.

He had given his life to the firm, working sixteen hours a day for many years. He had hardly seen his son grow up because of the incredible sacrifice he had made to be Partner one day in such a prestigious firm. He had the uncontrollable urge to plunge his steak knife into all three of their black hearts, but the blade was too flexible to inflict any serious damage.

When his wife had seen the look on his face after Rangoon's final humiliating remark, she grabbed his hand and said, "Don't be a fool. Do you want to spend the rest of your life behind bars?"

"Those greedy bastards need to pay," he muttered, his voice breaking with unbridled hatred and tears starting to flow. Grabbing a napkin, Alex left the table and headed for the men's room. As he stared at his receding hairline and the beginnings of a turkey neck in the mirror, he decided he would spend the rest of his life if he had to, to make them pay for what they had done to him.

His mind returned to the present, and he found himself sitting in the white van. Looking in the rear view mirror, he couldn't recognize the wild-eyed man staring back at him. The Partners had created a monster all right, and he was looking at him. He started to giggle as he thought about what Broadback must look like after meeting Jowls. He shuddered at the grisly thought.

He wondered if Martha had survived Jowls' attack. He'd given him a whiff of one of John's tennis shoes he'd stolen from his Manhattan fitness club and pointed him toward the Broadback vacation home. He had no idea how his trainer had created such a killing machine. The wolfhound had cost him a considerable amount of money, but he was worth every penny. He couldn't believe how gentle and loving Jowls could be right after such a brutal mission. He could rip his prey apart one minute, and cuddle with a baby the next. He'd also been

trained to be silent or scary depending on his master's vocal preference. Alex had used the howling destroyer mode on John. He wanted the bastard to feel the fear, before it bit him in the ass.

He had a two-day window to deal with Martha. He'd cut off her landline service, blocked her cell and Internet connections, and slashed all four tires on her SUV. He also had placed surveillance cameras in various locations around the property to monitor any movements outside the house. If she found the courage to attempt to seek help on foot, he would unleash Jowls again to take care of it, but he hoped she would wait for their caretaker to arrive on Monday morning.

He couldn't wait to see the replay of Jowls attack on his former boss. He had filmed the carnage in HD quality.

The next afternoon, David Hodgekiss and his wife, Grace, were dining under an enormous gazebo overlooking a small pond stocked with multi-colored fish. The elaborate picnic area was located about two hundred yards up a grassy knoll from their palatial retreat.

Hodgekiss had just opened an obscenely expensive bottle of wine when they both heard the gut-wrenching howl of Jowls closing in. Realizing immediately the impending danger, his second boss took his wife's hand, and together they ran headlong toward the safety of their home.

Behind them, they heard something big thrashing through the woods toward them, and the menacing sound of a predator's savage howl. Looking back, they saw the enormous shape emerge from the woods and couldn't believe the size of it. The mad frenzy of the devil dog's eyes took Hodgekiss's breath away. It looked more like a horse than a dog, but its huge jaws and vicious, bared teeth left no doubt it was on a mission to destroy.

Suddenly, Hodgekiss stopped and turned to face the oncoming monstrosity, "Run! Run for your life! Grace, get inside the house."

His wife turned and shouted, "You'll be killed!"

"No need for both of us to die. Run!"

Turning to resume her flight, she heard a stifled gurgling sound. Turning to look, she saw the hound from Hell ravaging

her husband. Blood poured from the gaping hole in his throat as the beast thrashed his limp body around between its teeth through the terrain like a rag doll.

When Grace reached the safety of the sliders, she immediately tried to call 911. The line was dead. Running to the SUV in the circular drive, she found the engine wouldn't start. Ignoring the consequences in a fit of rage and emotion, she started running down the driveway.

Alex saw Grace running away from the house in his array of monitors. He had no choice. When Jowls returned to the van, Alex gave him the scent of her moccasin, the command to take her out, and sent him on his way.

For some reason having Jowls ravage Grace the same as her husband brought a pang of remorse to Alex's conscience. He hoped he would not have to do the same to Martha Broadback, but he would if he had to.

Alex had rented Jowls for the weekend from a cloak and dagger operation recommended by a very unsavory gangbanger he'd had as a client for tax evasion. He'd never dealt with scumbags like him before, but he'd been the only underworld contact he knew personally. Walking on the wild side of life frightened him, but the intense hatred and the unquenchable thirst for revenge on all three of his former bosses had driven him to it. The worst part in renting Jowls was meeting his trainer who reminded him of a muscle-bound Joe Mantegna in the movie *Thinner,* but a lot scarier.

It was too late to worry about the consequences now. He was way past the point of no return. Two down, and one to go. Last, but not least, Imad Rangoon would be Jowl's victim for tomorrow. He was the one Alex blamed the most for his termination from the firm and his incessant assignments to the four corners of the earth for six month stints so many times. It was a miracle his wife, Gail, had stood by him through all the bitter years.

Rangoon had never married and flaunted his reputation as a consummate ladies man. He'd been caught by the receptionist twice having sex with a young paralegal on the table in the large conference room. Alex loathed him and considered him a disgusting waste of life. He didn't know what

bimbo would be with him this weekend, but after the last deadly deed was done, he would no longer care what happened to Martha Broadback and Imad's sex toy after that.

Alex's hands shook with anticipation as he extracted Rangoon's shoe from a gym bag and let Jowl's inhale his scent. Like before, he opened the rear doors of the van and pointed in the direction of Imad's complex. The enormous slobbering wolfhound's eyes widened with a ferocious anticipation as he leaped from the van like a race horse with his ass on fire and headed into the woods on his mission of death.

When Alex turned on the monitors to prepare for his viewing of Jowls' attack on his most hated boss, he discovered his connection to the cameras had been lost. After all his meticulous planning, he would not be able to see the beast ripping Rangoon apart live. He hoped he wouldn't lose the videotape he'd set up in an adjacent out building.

He decided to wait fifteen minutes, and then recall Jowls to the van. If the dog were bloody when he returned, he'd know the deed was done. It didn't matter what happened to the woman the miserable son of a bitch had brought with him for the weekend.

Back at Rangoon's massive retreat, he and his paramour were going at it like rabbits in heat. They knocked over a pitcher of margaritas and a bowl of chips and salsa that crashed on the concrete patio.

Neither of the lovers saw Jowls approaching until it leapt upon the back of the middle-aged Casanova, and started ripping him apart. The buxom brunette managed to slide out through the pool of warm blood on to the patio. Picking up a lawn chair, she struck the hound on the head and continued pummeling him as the beast ripped at Rangoon's midsection and genitals with his gnashing teeth. Pausing to rid itself of the relentless distraction of the lawn chair, Jowls turned from Rangoon, clamped his jaws on the woman's hand holding the chair, and wrenching it away, bit off three fingers on her left hand. She ran screaming to the house with blood gushing from the stumps of her fingers while the voracious beast resumed ravaging Rangoon's lifeless corpse.

A minute later, the woman reappeared with one hand wrapped in a dishtowel and a small handgun in the other. Sprinting to her lover's side, she planted six bullets into Jowls' skull.

Alex heard the shots, and immediately blew his ultrasonic whistle to bring the dog back to the van. After a time, when Jowls did not respond to his call, he assumed Rangoon had reached a weapon before the canine had reached him.

He hadn't planned on visiting the scene of the murders in delight, but this unexpected turn of events called for his immediate involvement. He had no choice, but to take out Rangoon himself. He'd taken care of the phones and sabotaged his car during the night, but he couldn't let the asshole contact the authorities. He could only imagine what Jowl's owners would do to him if the murder trail led back to them. And if by some miracle he did survive, he would certainly spend the rest of his life behind bars when the police got involved.

He had to be very careful. Without the live camera feeds, he didn't know what had happened at Rangoon's place. He placed his revolver in his belt behind his back and drove the van to Rangoon's complex.

Parking in the cover of the trees, he sneaked toward the main house through the woods. Making his way to the back of the A frame using several storage sheds for cover, Alex crept closer to the sprawling pool area. As soon as he peeked around the corner of the outbuilding, which was only sixty feet from the tiled patio, he spotted the bloody grass next to the pool. In plain view, he saw the hulking frame of the black beast spread-eagled on top of the splayed remains of a corpse he assumed was Rangoon. As he drew closer with wary apprehension, he saw the gaping hole in the top of the dog's head. Underneath the shards of bone and teeth, his old boss's face was barely recognizable.

The harrowing bloodlust of the scene sickened him, and caused his head to spin. For some reason, he had forgotten about the bimbo and struggled to the patio. Taking a seat, he couldn't believe where his maniacal lust for revenge had taken

him. What would Jowls master do when he found the dog was dead? If anyone had told him he would be a cold-blooded murderer someday, he would have laughed in their face at the total impossibility. He wondered what his poor wife who had stood by him like a saint would say if she could see him now. He wanted to call her, but telling her about what he'd done on the phone would be insane. He thought about not telling her at all.

Then, he heard the sound of the sliding door behind him followed by the sound of his wife's familiar voice. Slowly turning, he saw Gail standing before him with a handgun pointing at his head. Blood splattered her pink swimsuit and the towel wrapped around her left hand.

"Well, Alex, you stupid son of a bitch, since Broadback and Hodgekiss didn't show for breakfast this morning and didn't call, I assume they are as dead as Imad. I guess you've finally succeeded in getting your revenge, but what you don't know is I've been fucking your old boss behind your back for the past twenty years. It wasn't the Partners that sent you on all those godforsaken assignments. I'm the reason you spent all those lonely nights in those far off places."

Alex's face reddened with rage as he contemplated making a play for the gun concealed under his shirt at his back. His hands trembled as the adrenalin raced through his veins.

"While you were humping camels in the Sahara, I was giving Imad blow jobs at his apartment on Park Avenue. When you called me every night to cheer me up, I was never in our pathetic shit hole in the Boonies your measly paycheck could afford. I only tolerated you because of our son. If Imad would have married me, I would've left you in a New York minute."

Alex wanted to smash her face in with a hammer, blow her brains out with his gun, strangle the breath out of her with his bare hands, but all he could see was the muzzle of the Smith and Wesson 44 Magnum aimed directly at his nose. If he was going to make his move, he had to make it soon.

"You just killed the only man I ever loved. I hope you rot in Hell, you spineless, limp dick loser."

She pulled the trigger six consecutive times at pointblank

range, but the gun was empty.

The Cadaver

When Blanche, the anatomy instructor, pulled back the sheet, the young first year medical student recoiled with a gasp. The other students in green scrubs stood around the gurney and stared at the middle-aged corpse in a momentary state of awe. Despite the initial shock, they tried to stay as indifferent to the dead body as possible.

“If seeing a dead body is that upsetting to you, Roberta, possibly you should seek another profession.”

“I’ll be all right,” The young woman gasped, trying to catch her breath, “this is the first dead person I’ve ever seen.”

“Really. You certainly must have led a sheltered life. You

and Mark will begin by opening the chest cavity and dissecting John's liver."

"John?" one of the students asked.

"John Doe," Blanche explained, "is the name given to unidentified bodies not claimed by family members in sixty days. That's where we get most of our cadavers."

"He's been on ice for that long?" A pretty brunette with blue eyes asked with a wrinkled brow.

"At least that long. Your name is Florence?" Blanch asked, looking at her list. "Yes. Your partner will be George. I'd like you to dissect the kidneys for today's assignment. I'd like a full report of your findings on the condition of the organ by tomorrow."

Blanch paired the others and gave them their assignments. Shortly afterward, she saw Roberta running toward the ladies room, trying without success to contain the vomit spewing everywhere in her wake.

Working on cadavers who had passed more than thirty days ago depressed her. She believed the students could learn so much more if they could work on fresher bodies, but the system remained rigid on this point. To make matters worse, her state required a waiting period of sixty days, which was thirty days more than some other states. The waiting period allowed the cadavers loved ones to come forward and claim a body before it passed to the medical students. Sometimes relatives came forward after the dissection. Professors teaching anatomy always had to expect this eventuality in twenty percent of the cases.

The most upsetting delay occurred when the coroner delivered the body of a homeless person to the morgue who no one could identify. In these cases, the prolonged wait made no sense. How could someone come forward when the person's name was never published? Blanche tried and tried to get her superiors to change the sixty-day waiting period on these cases, but to no avail.

When she arrived home that evening, she didn't feel like cooking a meal. She shouted to her husband, Jeff, who was on the computer and her son, Max, who was playing a video game, "I'm too tired to cook. I'm ordering pizza." After getting

no response, as usual, she called in the order.

When the deliveryman arrived, she called out, “The pizza is here. Come and get it.” After two more tries, Jeff and Max finally came to the dinner table and began to wolf down several pieces of pepperoni and mushroom.

“Well, Jeff,” Blanche inquired, “tell me how your day went.”

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he replied, “Politics, politics. Everybody is trying to get the upper hand on somebody. I can’t bear to think about it. What happened with you?”

“One of the first year med students had never seen a dead body before and puked all over everything.”

Max winced as he put down his pizza slice.

“Sorry, big guy, I’ll behave,” Blanche said apologetically. Max resumed eating after taking a swig of Coke.

“I talked to the coroner again about changing the sixty day rule for homeless cadavers.”

“I don’t give you much hope for that,” Jeff replied.

“Why’s that?” Blanche said, looking perplexed.

“How can you single out homeless people from your corpse supply not to come under the same rule as everyone else? It’s not politically correct. It would be cadaver profiling?”

“I want to give my students the opportunity to dissect the freshest organs possible. When they become surgeons, they won’t be operating on dead people. When a surgeon makes an incision on a live person, he must take into account many factors to keep the person alive during the surgery. With a cadaver, nothing he can do will change the outcome of the procedure since the patient is already dead. It’s ludicrous to postpone dissection for sixty days when an unidentified person will never have someone come to claim him.

“Can’t we talk about something else?” Max said with his eyes rolling. “I can’t believe my mother works with dead bodies. Why would anyone choose such a thing for their career? It must be one slot down from proctologist.”

“Hey, big man. I’m training new doctors to save lives. Think about the end result. Without people like me, more people would die a much earlier death. My job also helps to

keep you in video games."

After dinner, Jeff and Max resumed their earlier activities, and Blanche started watching TV.

* * *

A couple of months later, Blanche received a call from a colleague who knew about her extreme dislike for the sixty-day rule. "Blanche, I've found someone who works in the morgue who's willing to look the other way on the waiting period for an extra $100 per head."

"Who would do this?" Blanche said incredulously, "and why would you not report him?"

"It doesn't matter who it is. I heard you wanted fresher corpses on unidentified homeless people to help teach your medical students. If you don't think a measly $100 per head is worth it, and you want to wait an extra thirty days, be my guest. It's no skin off my ass."

"Wait!" Blanche said, considerably softer. "Let me think about it. It's not worth ending my career over something like this." She thought about the old black and white movies where grave robbers supplied researchers with fresh corpses, and grimaced, realizing she was actually considering it.

"No one will be the wiser, and you don't have to get involved at all. I'll call you tomorrow at the same time. Keep in mind, you're not the only one who's requested this service, I promise you. And even If you decide to join the others, you'll still have to wait your turn."

After carefully considering the pluses and minuses, Blanche decided to take the chance for the sake of her students and the advancement of medicine.

A week later, when Blanche was about to pull back the sheet on a body, an arm slipped from the gurney on her side. She looked at the exposed limb in wonderment. It looked much different than any arm on a cadaver she'd seen in ten years. When she touched it, it felt hard and cold as usual, but in spite of the rigor mortis, it had a pinker color, was definitely less rigid to the touch, and had much less discoloration than normal. The time of death on the toe tag was November 6, which was 31 days ago. Blanche knew the date was wrong.

Gerald, a tall, nerdy looking student, who she selected to

dissect the corpse turned to his partner and said, “Wow, this cadaver seems different, Leonard, is he really dead?”

Blanche pulled the sheet further down the abdomen and said coyly, “I think the autopsy incision on his chest is a testament to his stature as a cadaver.” The rest of the class roared with laughter.

As the weeks passed, it became more common to see fresher cadavers in Blanche’s anatomy class. She was happy her students could learn more than she had when she started out. They would also be far ahead of most students in the nation. At the same time, she struggled with the guilt of breaking the rules mandated by the State Medical Board and the fear it could lead to the end of her teaching career.

The thought of someone at the morgue pocketing an extra hundred dollars for providing these cadavers also weighed heavily on her mind. Now that she had participated in the illegal acts, how could she stop? Were there really other medical professionals breaking the rules like herself, or was that just a teaser to make her take the bait?

The family had planned a ten-day trek to climb Mount Rainier. Roughing it in the wild had never appealed to Blanche, but knowing how much Jeff and Max enjoyed it, she agreed to go with them each year. Taking this time off always put additional pressure on her the week preceding the trip, and this year was no exception.

On Thursday of that week, Dr. Henry Wildermuth came to her class to discuss a medical issue. As he made his way across the laboratory to speak with Blanche, he noticed two students dissecting a cadaver on the way. Pausing at the table, he stood in awe at the general condition of the male specimen who was about forty years old. Taking note of the clipboard hanging on the gurney and reading the data on the toe tag, he stood with a wrinkled brow and an incredulous expression, correlating the dates with the condition and appearance of the corpse.

Taking note of his scrutiny, Blanche excused herself from her discussion with the students and meandered over to her fellow professor.

“Hello, Henry. To what do I owe this unexpected

pleasure?"

He paused for a moment, and then, turning to face her, remarked, "I must say none of my cadavers look anything close to as good as this fellow. I'd say his time of death could be measured in days rather than weeks. Where did you find such a fresh specimen?" Wildermuth waited for her to respond with marked anticipation.

"The cadaver came to me the same way yours come to you. Is there a problem?"

"I've heard some of the professors are getting special treatment by greasing someone's palm in the morgue now and then, but certainly you're not one of these misguided felons. Your reputation for integrity precedes you." Wildermuth's right eyebrow lifted, and he looked for a reaction to his comment in her eyes.

"Henry, you know me better than that. I just take what they give me." Blanche picked up the clipboard and made a mental calculation. "The dates on this chart are definitely incorrect. Someone must have written in the wrong date. It happens sometimes."

"I came over to ask you if you want to join me for lunch. I have a few "what ifs" to run by you."

"I'd love to, Henry, but I have to leave early today, I'm going on a ten-day vacation with the family to climb Mt. Rainier.

"That sounds exciting, but you don't strike me as a mountain climber," Wildermuth said, shaking his head. " I've never heard you mention it before. Do you expect to come back with your fingers and toes intact? A surgeon may get along with toes, but fingers are pretty much a necessity."

Blanche smiled and reminisced the affair they'd had when they first met, "I'm really a lot more athletic than you might think. When Jeff and I were dating, we climbed a number of the tall mountains in the US. It's more his thing than mine, but I can hold my own, and Max loves it. I'd rather be on a beach in Hawaii than hanging off a cliff, freezing to death, but it's a chance for us to do something together as a family.

"Well, be careful. We can have lunch when you return,"

Wildermuth replied, and moving closer, he whispered, “By the way, I heard through the grapevine the Dean has authorized an audit of the costs for the department. It’s scheduled to start next week.”

The words chilled her to the bone, but she tried to remain calm, “That’s good to know, Henry. I hadn’t heard about it. I appreciate the head’s up.”

Blanche watched Wildermuth eyeballing the cadaver on the metal table as he exited the lab. She wondered if he knew she was involved in the illegal trafficking he spoke of. Because they had become close way back when, she knew he wished her no harm. He could even be watching her back.

Back in her office, she picked up the phone and called the doctor who had initiated her involvement with the person in the morgue. “George, I hear the Dean has ordered an audit of the department’s expenses. Do you know anything about it?”

“Not a thing. Why are you calling me?”

“You know why. You’re the one who put me on to the guy in the morgue,” Blanche retorted sharply.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I’m in the middle of something. I can’t help you.” Click.

“The lying son of a bitch,” she thought, and slammed down the phone.

She dialed her home and Jeff answered, “When will you be home? I want to leave before the rush hour. You know what happened last year.”

“I'm sorry, darling, I won't be able to go with you after all. I just found out about a surprise audit, and I need to review my files and speak with some people before the auditors come next week.”

“What does an audit have to do with you, Blanche? This sounds like an excuse, if you ask me. I know climbing mountains is not on your list of favorite things to do, but you promised both of us you’d go no matter what.”

“I know, darling. Until five minutes ago, I had every intention of going, but this audit came out of nowhere. To be frank, I made a bad decision about the sixty day waiting period, and I need to cover my ass.”

“You what?”

“I authorized an extra hundred for each fresh cadaver. I did it for my students, but now, my career might be on the line.”

“I can’t believe what you’re telling me, and the part that really hurts is you didn’t discuss such a critical decision for all of us before you blundered ahead. I understand why you did it, but is your obsession for excellence worth losing everything we’ve worked for?”

“I made a bad decision,” Blanche confessed, starting to cry. “I really can’t explain what came over me. I’m truly sorry for my lapse in judgment. I hope you can forgive me. I’m really out on a limb, and all I can do now is get as many ducks in a row as I can before my career comes crashing down around my ears.”

“Well, what can I say? Let’s hope you can find a way to get through this. Would it help to go to the Dean and beg for him to forgive your indiscretion?”

“Frankly, Jeff, part of the reason I agreed to participate in this insanity was my main source told me most of the other professors were already involved. I should have verified this then, but I never got around to it. Now, it's critical I find out how many of us are really in this program to decide my course of action. That’s why, I can’t go with you to climb Rainer.”

Jeff voice cracked with emotion, “What ever happens… for better or worse, I love you, and I always will, even if we do have to go to the poor house. Your career is certainly more important than climbing a mountain. After all, it’s no Everest. Max and I can postpone the trip. We’ll stay and give you moral support and go on our vacation some other time.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’ll be at the lab all weekend and probably the best part of next week. There’s absolutely nothing you can do to help. Go without me and have a wonderful time. Tell Max, I’m sorry.”

“I can’t let you to face this alone,” Jeff countered.

“You may be back before the audit even starts. Go.”

After several more back and forth interchanges, they agreed Jeff and Max would take the trip to Rainer without her.

Blanche went to the accounting department and asked to see the paid bill files and the purchase orders for certain vendors, which put a look of concern on the payable clerk's face.

"Look," Blanche explained, "I'm trying to find the address of several vendors I used over the last several years. It's important I contact them about the information they provided, and I didn't keep a list."

The clerk gave Blanche a sour look and pointed to the bank of file cabinets for the current year lining the wall to the right. The woman also showed her the location of the files for the two previous years. Blanche pulled the cadaver folders for all three years, took a seat at an empty desk, and started plowing through them. She found the requisitions for the extra $100 started more than three years before, and appeared on almost half of the invoices.

She was relieved to discover every professor, except Wildermuth, had authorized the bogus charge periodically, even before she'd joined the program. During her review, she found two $500 charges marked as "special delivery" in the current batch of invoices, which worried her. What was this "special" charge all about?

After a time, she realized she had misjudged the number of invoices related to cadavers and so; the audit of the files would not take long at all. Blanche was sorry she had not joined Jeff and Max on the vacation, but she still wanted to speak with some of the other professors to see if they were concerned about the unexpected audit.

The controller entered the room and advised Blanche the accounting department would be closing in a half an hour and would be locked for the entirety of the three-day holiday weekend. The policy of the university was that the files could not be taken from the accounting department. She would have to come back Tuesday to resume her review of the paid invoices.

Blanche took a big pile of the purchase orders and invoices into an adjacent room filled with office machines and started making copies with the time remaining.

Over the weekend, she reviewed the copies and

tabulated the number of special charges for each doctor. Her analysis confirmed that every doctor other than Wildermuth had participated in the illegal program just as George had said. She still couldn't wait to give him a piece of her mind for hanging up on her.

On Tuesday morning, Blanche stormed into George's office without knocking, and took a chair across from him. George immediately threw up his hands as a sign of a truce, got up, and closed the door. "Before you go into a rant, realize, I couldn't speak with you before. The Dean was in my office. Now, what do you want?"

"I want the name of the person who is providing the fresh cadavers from the morgue?"

"If you must know, I'm the brains behind the operation. I have a lackey working with me who does the heavy lifting. What's your problem?"

"There's going to be an audit next week, and I'm concerned my indiscretion may come to light and my career will be history.

"Who said there's an audit?"

"Wildermuth."

"He's just trying to scare you. He's the only doctor who is not participating, He's always had the hots for you and is probably trying to protect you from the slings and arrows of possible misfortune."

"There's no audit?"

"No, and there never will be. The Dean himself participated in the program when he taught anatomy. Stop worrying."

Blanche exhaled and sat back in her chair, "Are you sure your heavy lifter in the morgue is following the thirty-day protocol? Some of the corpses we've seen lately seem too fresh."

"I can't believe you're complaining the stiffs are too fresh. I thought you wanted your students to be on the cutting edge with a scalpel. Excuse the pun."

"I keep seeing Boris Karloff, the sinister cabman, digging up corpses from the cemetery to deliver to Dr. MacFarlane in *The Body Snatcher."*

“Stop worrying. Do you think I would risk doing something that could bring all of us down? Jose knows I’d cut his balls off and feed ‘em to the coyotes.”

“What about this special charge for $500 that started appearing lately instead of $100?” Blanched asked, eying him suspiciously.

“Five hundred dollars?” George barked. “I don’t know anything about any $500 charge. Where did you see it?”

“It’s on the invoices I looked at in the accounting department to prepare for the audit that’s not happening. There were two this month.”

“Damn that greedy little weasel! The only explanation I can think of is he must have come up with a new way to make money on the black market, and inadvertently charged the wrong amount on two of our invoices.” George’s face reddened with rage as he rose from his chair fuming.

“I’m sorry Blanche, but this could be the end of the program, at least, until I can find a replacement for the slimy little creep.”

With nothing more to say, Blanche trudged back to her office. She couldn’t wait to tell Jeff what she’d learned from George. They would return on the following Monday afternoon. She spent most of the rest of the week trying to reach Jeff and Max, but was not surprised to find both their phones out of service due to the severe weather at Mt. Rainier that week.

On Monday morning, Blanche sipped a latte from Starbucks and made a list of her class plans for the day. At 9 a.m., she went to the lab where her students waited for class to begin. They quieted when they saw her approach, and watched two gurneys burst through the double doors into the lab. The students separated into two groups beside the two cadavers covered with an opaque, plastic covering.

Pulling back the sheet on the first specimen, Blanche saw a lopsided head wrapped in a gauze bandage. She assumed the young male had died from massive injuries in an automobile accident.

The students surrounding the table stood in awe at the atypical condition of the body. The cadaver appeared to be a

young teen, probably thirteen or fourteen years old. Except for the head trauma, the skin looked almost like that of the students standing around it. Once again, Blanche immediately thought of Boris Karloff, the grave robber, in *The Body Snatcher,* and a chill ran down the back of her neck. Something was very wrong about this cadaver. Wrong to the point of embarrassment. There was no visible trace of discoloration from rigor mortis.

Blanche reviewed the clipboard, which indicated the body had been on ice for sixty days. She didn't know how to explain the condition of the corpse to her class, and decided not to try. Jose's continued disregard for protocol and his blatant falsification of the data by such a long period of time caused her to wonder what other atrocities he might be capable. She shuddered at the thought.

Putting down the clipboard, she shifted her focus to the dissection.

An uncanny sense of déjà vu engulfed Blanche as she surveyed the upper portion of the torso and the jagged sutured incisions of the autopsy. She gasped when her eyes fell upon the distinctive birthmark shaped like a butterfly below the boy's right nipple. There was no doubt; this was Max, her only child that she adored with every fiber of her being. The shock of what she was seeing took her breath away, and her face turned as white as a sheet. Several members of the class, particularly Roberta, who Blanche had embarrassed on the first day of med school, snickered mercilessly and cleared the way as they watched her stagger backward into the adjoining table.

Trying to steady herself against the metal leg, she saw a second male cadaver with a bandage covering his face that the second group had already started dissecting. Her hand shot to her mouth as she teetered drunkenly over the partially nude body. Pulling the rest of the sheet away, her eyes filled with horror when she recognized her husband's cobra tattoo just above the pubic hair surrounding his substantial penis.

Who's Your Daddy

The wake and the funeral were over, and Cecil was alone in the house where he'd grown up. His mother, Katherine, had died of a heart attack at the age of 70.

As he sat on the sofa nursing a warm beer in the old house, he kept looking at the pictures of his mother and him at different stages of his life. Conspicuously, the father he had never known was not among them. His mother had said he died in an automobile accident just before he was born. He wondered what his old man was like, and why no one ever wanted to talk about him.

Somehow, the loss of his mother had affected him more

than he thought possible. He had broken into tears several times that day which was something he had never done as far back as he could remember. The sense of being totally alone in the world with no one he could count on to be there no matter what had rocked his world more than he had thought possible. He had made casual friends at work, but no one he had ever confided in like his mother. She knew everything about him. Things no one else would ever know. He actually felt a need to be with another human being on this fateful night. The old house seemed extremely creepy without his mother in it.

Since he had left the neighborhood thirteen years before to take a job 700 miles away in Atlanta, he couldn't think of anyone to call except the couple next door who'd helped him with the funeral arrangements. Where were the old friends he used to know? Why had he made no effort to keep in touch? His best buddies and the crazy things they'd gotten into in high school lingered on his mind, but only as nostalgic memories.

He went to the kitchen, and finding the telephone number in the address book near the phone, he called the elderly couple. After three rings, the lady next door answered, "Hello. This is the Phelps' residence."

"Hello, Margaret, this is Cecil next door. I wonder if I could come over and talk for a while. I'm feeling very lonely in this big house by myself, and there's no one else I know to call, but you."

After a muffled word to someone else, and then a lengthy pause, she replied, "Why, sure, Cecil. I'm preparing dinner for Abe and me. You're welcome to join us, but keep in mind, it's been a long day, and we were planning to turn in early."

"I understand. I'll just come for a little while."

Cecil put down the phone and made a beeline out the door. Margaret seemed less friendly than when he'd arrived, but he agreed, it had been a long day for all of them, and she had lost a dear friend.

Abe greeted him and ushered him into the dining room.

The aroma of the hot food brought back fond memories of his mother's home style cooking. After making small talk during dinner, helping them with the dishes, and cleaning off the table, the three of them settled on a sectional in the living room. The TV was on, but the volume was barely audible.

Cecil was first to speak, "While I was sitting in the living room, reminiscing the pictures of my mother and me on the wall, it occurred to me, I don't remember ever seeing a picture of my father. Living next door for forty-six years, I assume you got to know him to some extent before I was born. What can you tell me about him?"

Margaret and her husband exchanged glances, and after clearing her throat, Margaret said, "As I remember, he was about six feet tall and of medium build. To be frank, he looked a lot like you at your age, much more so than Katherine."

"What did he do for a living?"

Margaret looked at her husband nervously, and replied, "As I recall, your father had quite a few jobs. He was kind of a jack of all trades."

"Master of none, I suppose?" Cecil remarked with a laugh.

"I don't know about that, but most of the time we knew him, he was a traveling salesmen. He was on the road so much of the time, we rarely saw him."

Cecil tossed this piece of information around in his head to see if it corresponded with what his mother had said. He didn't remember anything about his father being a traveling salesman.

"My mother said my father's name was Phillip."

Abe fielded the question, "That's right, Phillip Blevens."

"Blevens? That can't be," Cecil blurted. "My name is Williams. You must be mistaken."

"What am I thinking about?" Abe said nervously. "I must have been having a senior moment. Of course, his name was Phillip Williams."

When the TV news commentator mentioned almost imperceptibly that a homeless man had been found in an alley off of Lincoln Avenue with his face partially eaten, Margaret's almost dropped the coffee cup she held. Regaining her

composure, her expression returned to normal as if the news flash meant nothing to her.

After an uncomfortable pause, Cecil asked Abe, “Did you and Margaret get together with my parents socially before I came along?”

Margaret answered quickly, apparently trying to speak before Abe replied, “Not really. I did things with Katherine… bridge, mahjong, but Phillip was always a loner when he wasn’t on the road.” She paused, and looking weary said, “Cecil, I’m really sorry, but I’m developing a migraine. I hate to cut your visit short, but I’m going to have to turn in.”

“Would it be all right if I come back tomorrow and talk with you before I return to Atlanta?”

Margaret responded immediately, “I’m sorry, but we’re going away the next few days. Why don’t you call us next week if you think of anything else you’d like to know.”

The three of them stood, and Cecil thanked them for the dinner and the company, and returned to his home next door.

Something about the entire conversation with the next-door neighbors didn’t sit right with him. He couldn’t understand how they could live next door for twelve years before he was born and know so little about his father. He suspected they’d been lying about him all evening. Abe getting his father’s name wrong was really suspicious. After that, it was obvious Margaret didn’t want him to answer any more questions.

With nothing else to do that evening and without cable on the TV, Cecil decided to box up his mother’s personal items and put them in his car. To his amazement, he found the house peculiarly free of personal items. Had someone come into the house after his mother died and taken everything that pertained to the past? The house didn’t have a basement, but he remembered his mother had stored boxes in the attic when he was growing up.

Climbing the stairs off the kitchen to the attic, he didn’t find any boxes of photographs and memorabilia. In fact, a box of extra ceramic tile pieces for the kitchen, and two old curtain rods were the only items stored in the huge space. Afterward, he looked in the garage. At first, he thought it too had no personal items, but on a high shelf tucked away in a corner, he

found a small box with twelve pictures from his childhood.

How could his mother and dad accumulate so little? He couldn't remember any fires or floods to explain why their personal items would be missing.

The day had been a nightmare, so he decided to turn in early, but in spite of his exhaustion, the mystery of the missing items weighed heavily on his mind.

The next morning, he called Margaret. He was surprised she answered on the first ring, until he sensed her considerable agitation when she recognized his voice, "I know you're going out, and I won't detain you, but after searching the entire house, including the attic and the garage, I only found twelve pictures of me growing up. I remember photograph albums, scrapbooks, files of tax returns and boxes of my teenage stuff my mother stored in the attic. All of it's missing. Do you have any idea what could have happened to these things?"

The silence on the line was maddening to Cecil as if every word was like pulling teeth. For a moment, he thought he'd lost the connection and was ready to redial when Margaret said, "I'm sorry, Cecil, but I don't have any idea where she kept such things. The pictures on the wall in the living room are the only ones I've ever seen."

"Really?" he muttered. "I just wondered. Well, thanks anyway. I'll see you the next time I come to town." Cecil put down the receiver, exasperated by the obvious cover-up. Margaret and Abe knew something they weren't telling him.

Cecil decided he had to solve the mystery of his past before returning to Atlanta as he'd planned. He headed for the local newspaper office that printed their first edition in 1896. He asked the elderly lady at the front desk with the stick up her ass if he could see back issues of the paper from 1976 through 1978. After hemming and hawing, she indicated the older issues were only on microfilm, but could be referenced with a reader. After a deep sigh, the silver- haired woman led him to the dilapidated looking machine and gave him a tray of microfilm rolls of the years he'd requested.

Placing the first roll of 1976 into the reader, he started searching for anything that might tell him something about his

father, with a particular emphasis on the obituary section. After two hours of tiring scrutiny, he found something he wasn't looking for. The headline on the front page read, "Mass Murderer and Cannibal, Phillip Blevens, arrested in Raintree County." The article went on to say Blevens had allegedly raped and murdered thirty-eight young women. Several as young as fourteen years old. The signature of the serial rapist and murderer was the eating of flesh from the face of his victims. Some of the bodies had no lips, nose, or ears when they were found.

Shocked by this startling piece of information, Cecil reread this part several times and then continued reading. The article went on to say the one woman who escaped Blevens' clutches after being brutally raped with a razor at her throat was Miss Katherine Underwood, who conclusively identified her assailant in a police line-up. The police were holding Blevens without bail at the county lockup. If convicted, he would be put to death by lethal injection."

Cecil sat dumbfounded by the unbelievable write-up. It wasn't hard for him to put two and two together. His mother was raised a strict Catholic, and her parents didn't believe in abortion. He was likely the illegitimate son of the mass murderer, Phillip Blevens, and this was why his mother and the next-door neighbors wouldn't talk about the past.

Cecil often wondered why he'd been born so fucked up, and now he knew. He mused at the old cliché that came immediately to mind. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. The most significant difference between his M.O. and his father's was that most of his victims had been homeless men. He'd never wanted to have sex with a woman since he'd always been a homosexual. He had no problem chewing off lips, a nose, and sometimes the cheeks of a man or a woman. If he was really hungry, a tongue with a scoop of vanilla ice cream made a delightful dessert. In terms of cannibalism, he'd always been a switch hitter. He could eat men or women.

After his eyes were about to pop out of his head from hours of looking at the reader, he thanked the woman at the front desk and drove to the library. Finding a computer, he found that Phillip Blevens had been put to death by lethal

injection in 1988 when Cecil was ten years old.

Reading about the death of his biological father was the same as reading about someone he'd never known from Podunk, USA. It meant absolutely nothing. He never understood why some people get all teary eyed when they discovered an unknown relative actually existed. The concept made no sense to him. Just because a person is related doesn't mean you have to like them. After all, they could be a child molester or someone who likes to eat flesh off of faces. Who could get sentimental over a person like that?

The trip home had been extremely productive, it had answered the mysteries that had plagued him all his life. Too bad it had taken the death of his mother, the one person he'd loved more than any other, to make it happen.

He'd planned on giving the keys to the realtor and returning to Atlanta yesterday, but now, a loose end had developed he had to deal with before he left. He had a bad feeling about the next-door neighbors. He was certain they knew all about his father, but had promised his mother never to tell him. They had probably removed all the personal items from the house to comply with his mother's wishes when she died. To make matters worse, the looks on their faces when the news anchor reported the details of the homeless man's death confirmed they suspected he might have murdered him.

He'd promised himself before he left Georgia he would not kill anyone in this hick town. Atlanta was a big city, and the death of a homeless person wouldn't even be a blip on the radar, but here in Pottsville, it was front-page news. Even a police chief, who primarily handed out parking tickets, might suspect him since he was the only new visitor in town. He knew killing the homeless man was a risk he shouldn't have taken, but he was so goddamned hungry after the long drive, he couldn't control himself.

He was certain Margaret and Abe suspected him, but the one thing that contradicted this idea was they had not called the police after he left their house last night. Margaret had also answered her phone when he called this morning. Maybe his worries were unfounded, but it didn't matter. He couldn't take a chance on them turning him in to the police.

Margaret had said they were going away for a few days, but when he pulled into his driveway and saw their car parked in front of their house, he heaved a sigh of relief. He decided to wait until after dark to go next door. His appetite would be greater then. It helped to be overly hungry when old meat was on the menu. It was so much harder to chew.

At dusk, he saw their lights come on in the kitchen and the living room. At 8 o'clock, the kitchen went dark, and at nine, all the lights went out.

Allowing plenty of time for the old codgers to fall asleep, Cecil exited his house through the laundry room and crept silently around to the neighbors' back door. His credit card worked perfectly; one swipe and he was in.

Standing in the kitchen, he smelled the sweet aroma of a cake Margaret must have baked that day. As he passed the counter on his way into the living room, the guilt of slaughtering his mother's best friend and eating her face for dinner unsettled him. Old Abe had also been a sweet old guy; he didn't deserve to die. His victims were usually people he didn't know. Murdering someone he'd broken bread with weighed heavily on his conscience.

As he inched forward in the darkness, he thought he heard someone whisper further down the hall. He tightened his grip on his Crocodile Dundee hunting knife in his left hand and the baseball bat in his right. The circumstances would dictate which method he would use. He thought a couple of good whacks to the head would do nicely until he tied them down.

Suddenly, a bright light blinded him, and a woman's shriek that sounded like a scalded hyena had burst from the portals of hell disoriented him. His body quaked from a debilitating electric shock from both sides of the hallway that sent him slumping to the floor as blackness enveloped him.

* * *

Sometime later, Cecil's mind cleared, and he heard an unfamiliar voice say, "Dominic, I think he's coming to."

He opened his eyes and saw two men standing over him. He tried to move his hands, but immediately found his arms and legs strapped down. The chair he'd been tied to was slanted backwards like a dentist's chair. A bright light

assaulted his eyes, and he found his jaws were clamped open so he couldn't close his mouth. "Who're you," he mumbled.

"I'm Dominic, Margaret and Abe's son, and this is my friend, Guido."

"Wher'm I?" Cecil struggled to speak.

"Somewhere no one will ever find you," Dominic said with a cruel smile.

Cecil grimaced with his most puzzled expression, and Dominic slapped him in the face hard and bloodied his lip.

"Hey, this doesn't take a rocket scientist, Cecil. Your father mutilated and tortured my little sister, Charlotte, and we're going to do the same to you to get even. Now that we know you murder people, too, we don't feel so bad."

Dominic placed a tool chest on the chair in front of him and withdrew a pair of pliers. "My parents thought about turning you in to the cops, but decided to call me instead. I convinced them my kind of retribution could help ease their painful memories about Charlotte's death better than having you rot behind bars for the rest of your life. I'm the guy people call when killing someone quick is not good enough to compensate for the crime they committed."

The big man started working on his front tooth, and Cecil screamed and struggled to free himself, but Guido held him down with powerful hands.

Dominic continued, "I've never had the opportunity to work on someone where I had a personal stake in the degree of pain. You're the first, and I plan to soar to new heights. Me and Guido never went to dental school, but over the years, I've become an expert with various types of pliers, and Guido is a master with a drill. After I make an extraction, he makes sure the nerves are completely raw with his drill. Yeah, when we get through with you in a month or so I guarantee you won't be eating any meat.

Cecil screamed like a little girl, and Dominic farted several times he had to strain so hard to pull the first front tooth. Guido plugged in the drill, and couldn't wait to get started.

Believe It Or Not

Garth looked at the two-lane highway ahead of him. It was late, and he had not seen one car on this godforsaken road. He had gotten away before the police set up the roadblock. He didn't think his cronies had been as lucky. A black leather satchel with his share of the bank heist was in the trunk. He had counted ten bundles of twenties when he had stopped for a pee at a rest stop earlier. He had at least $200,000, and he couldn't wait to see his sister in Mobile.

The heist had not gone as planned. One of the security guards had tried to be a hero, and Clyde, his best buddy since middle school, had to waste him. Consequently, he had graduated from small type breaking and entering capers to the big leagues in less than twenty-four hours. The most likely to succeed and the captain on the football team would now have his face on a wanted poster for robbery and murder. He wondered if Georgia had the death penalty. He had never had a reason to think of such a thing before today.

His eyes were getting heavy from staring at the miles and miles of yellow lines splitting the black asphalt ahead of him. He had stopped for coffee, a coke, and some No-Doz at

the last gas station, but he was still struggling to stay awake. He turned up the volume on the one station that kept fading in and out. As far as he could tell from his dog-eared map, he was 70 miles from the next town, and his gas gauge was below a quarter tank. He should have filled up when he pulled off the interstate to avoid the police roadblock.

Garth rolled down the driver's side window and stuck his head into the onrushing wind. The rusted-out '99 Chevy hurtled into the blackness of the lonely road at 75 miles per hour. The sheer desolation of this stretch of highway without a single car, billboard advertisement, or even an occasional broken down shanty made him feel like the last man on earth.

When the static on the radio became louder than the music, he turned it off.

In the light of the full moon, the clouds had the ominous look of a giant tsunami coming from the gulf toward him. He had never seen a sky so scary.

Trying desperately to stay awake, he slowed the car and ransacked the console. He couldn't believe it when he found an old cigar buried deep in a sea of matchbooks and out of date maps that must have been in there for years. His lighter didn't work and neither did the first three matchbooks that looked waterlogged from another life. But, when all seemed lost, he miraculously found half a box of wooden matches in the glove compartment that did work. He placed the big fat stogie between his lips, struck a match on the dash, and lighting it, sucked in a lungful of the worst tobacco smoke money could buy five years ago. He coughed and struggled to catch his breath. He rarely smoked, but he thought the cigar would help keep him awake. After inhaling the giant cancer stick until he felt he was going to puke, he finally had to flick the ghastly thing burning his fingers out the window. He saw the sparks dance across the asphalt and skip out of sight in the rear view mirror.

It immediately dawned on him that a reporter on the radio had just warned drivers not to toss cigarettes out the window due to the lack of rain this summer. The commentator had also reminded campers to be sure to extinguish their campfires. He remembered the old commercials when

Smokey the Bear had said, “Only you can prevent forest fires.” Somehow, he was okay with being a bank robber, but he didn’t want to be a firebug. As he sped into the night toward Mobile Bay, he continued looking in his rearview mirror. Was it his imagination or did he actually see an orange glow in the blackness behind him? The last thing he wanted was to bring attention to his getaway route.

He continued to doze off. The final warning that he should pull over came when he awoke driving in his subconscious going 15 miles an hour. The landscape was extremely flat, and there was almost nothing to hit anywhere close to the shoulder of the road, but in the distance, he saw flashing red lights and the skeleton of tall concrete pillars he thought must be Interstate 10. Worrying he might fall asleep completely and drive into one of these massive blocks of concrete; he decided to pull off the road to get some much needed shut-eye. He saw a clump of bushes and pulled behind it. The low-lying mist that blanketed the marsh along the road would also provide cover if another car ever did come along.

He heard the wind begin to howl and saw the bushes next to the car bending over in the torrent. He closed his eyes and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

Hours later, the sound of a helicopter above startled him awake. It sounded alarmingly close. Then, a large, feathered object struck the center of the windshield causing it to splinter outward in all directions. The beak of a duck protruded through the glass. In a heartbeat, several more ducks bombarded the roof and the trunk of the Chevy. The impact of each blow sounded like a bowling ball striking the exterior with tremendous force. Every hundred feet or so, several more ducks hit the ground in front of the car as the sound of a troubled chopper roared above and came rapidly closer. The aircraft exploded in a ball of fire a few hundred feet to the right. He guessed the helicopter had inadvertently flown into the flock of ducks.

In the rear view mirror, Garth was mortified to see his fear of becoming a firebug had been realized after all. A

raging forest fire was devouring the terrain on both sides of the road. Turning on the ignition, the Chevy roared to life and bolted forward. The forest fire coming at him from the left and the flames from the crash to the right left only a narrow path back to the highway. Even though the wingspan of the duck in the windshield, the blood splatter, and the billowing smoke made it impossible to see anything ahead, Garth fishtailed forward where he thought the road would be. He was relieved to feel the front wheels thump back on the asphalt. In the rear view mirror, he saw two feathered bodies slide down the back window, leaving a murky trail of blood.

Garth peered through the small section of windshield at the road ahead, and could no longer tolerate the duck lodged in the windshield ogling him with its one open eye. Consequently, after driving almost blind for another 500 feet up the road, he pulled over, got out of the car, and gripping a handful of feathers, pried the duck's carcass from the windshield and discarded it. Moving to the rear, he pushed the two ducks blocking the back window off on the ground.

Returning to the car, he sped away. The shattered glass and blood splatter still made visibility almost nonexistent, but even if he had a bucket of water and a squeegee, he couldn't spare any time to clean the window with the raging inferno almost riding on his trunk lid. He wondered why he didn't see the flashing lights of a stream of fire engines speeding cross the bridge with sirens blaring to fight the fire. His question was answered a moment later when he saw the approaching funnel of a tornado churning up the land in front of him. Stomping his brake pedal almost to the floorboard, he came to a screeching halt and sat spellbound in the middle of the road between the rock and the hard place.

In a matter of minutes, the twister would run headlong into the forest fire burning out of control on a fast track toward the Bay. He couldn't tell if the twister or the flames would get to him first.

In the distance to the right, he saw a culvert and the first gigantic leg of I-10 leading to the bridge. Would the culvert half submerged in water next to the concrete stanchion give him shelter from the storm?

He pulled the trunk release, and getting out, raced to the rear of the car to retrieve his satchel of money. To his dismay, he found the trunk battered so badly with dents from the ducks that had bombarded it, he could not get it open. He looked about the ground for something to use as a crowbar, but found nothing. Desperate, he placed the tips of his fingers into the narrow slit and tried with all his might to wrench it free, but it wouldn't budge.

The ominous funnel of death was almost upon him, giving him no choice but to abandon the satchel and make a run for the culvert.

Sprinting ahead of the wall of death, Garth leaped down the embankment and scrambled inside the huge cylinder of concrete that stood next to one of the massive legs of the highway bridge.

Minutes later, he saw telephone poles hurtling through the air like toothpicks. Enormous green highway signs atop the bridge lifted off the ground and sailed high into the whirlwind. And then, like a giant buzz saw, the twister settled on his Chevy and split it into two halves. The trunk lid burst open, and the leather satchel flew apart, sending streams of greenbacks into the wind as if they were shot from a cannon.

Suddenly, the sky erupted with the hardest rain Garth had ever seen. The downpour and the twister began to drown the raging forest fire. Like magic, the inferno ebbed, and the debris began to smolder. Garth shuttered in horror inside the culvert as the tornado continued to churn up the ground and the water around him.

The driving rain caused the water in the culvert to swell abruptly, and before he could climb out, the rushing torrent had swept him into the turbulence. Grabbing hold of a limb from a fallen tree, he held on for dear life and went for the hellish ride of his life into the rampaging floodwater.

After another hour of fighting the whirlwind to a state of sheer exhaustion, the wind subsided, and the rain stopped. Garth fell back against the tree limbs and watched the clouds slowly melting away. The sun began to rise on the distant horizon, and the tree with him aboard finally came to rest at the edge of a swamp. Struggling to his feet, he peered into the

aftermath of toppled trees, churned up highway, and startling devastation as far as he could see. Sections of the interstate had been swept away. The landscape in all directions was a wasteland.

All he had was the clothes on his back and $23 in his pants pocket. His car and the satchel with $200,000 were gone. He struggled from the muck of the swamp and, planting his feet on solid ground, thought how lucky he was to be alive.

When he had nicked himself shaving yesterday morning, he wondered if it was the beginning of a shitty day. Little did he know then, the shit storm that lay ahead. He looked at the morning sun lifting into a new day, filled with promise and hope. There would always be another bank to rob.

Then, he saw the fifteen-foot gators with hungry eyes and gaping teeth that surrounded him. This day was also starting on a sour note, and he was pretty sure it was going to be even shittier than the day before.

The Blizzard

Helen saw the drifting snow outside the kitchen window. Harry was supposed to get home early. His company only worked half a day before the Christmas holidays. She wondered if he had lost track of time and missed the train. It usually did not matter if he was a little late, but this weekend they were to meet at her parents' estate in Medford, New Jersey, which was two and a half hours from Manhattan on a good day. Tonight was Christmas Eve and the Friday before the long holiday weekend; now, together with the blizzard, the commute by rail would certainly be a nightmare. There was no telling when Harry would arrive in Medford.

Helen hated to think she might be alone in this spooky

old house for most of the evening. Even on a summer day, the great expanse of the 200-year-old, twenty-room mansion unsettled her, but she feared the night and the blizzard without Harry to keep her company would stress her to the breaking point. Even when Harry was with her, the incessant, weird noises frightened her enormously, particularly those that came from the part of the house that hadn't been occupied for years. Whenever she mentioned hearing a strange sound, Harry called her an "old fraidy cat" and laughed mercilessly. She knew old houses were prone to have creaks and groans, but that reality had never given her comfort.

Placing another log in the fireplace, she turned on the TV and channel surfed to a soft rock music station. She'd prepared an exquisite dinner and chilled a bottle of expensive champagne.

They always opened one present on Christmas Eve, and the rest in the morning. Malcolm, their devoted caretaker, had brought in a twelve-foot tall tree and decorated it in the expansive living room for this special weekend. He'd also hung red stockings from the mantle just like the ones the family had when she was a little girl.

Outside, the howling wind and the sound of the snow on the exterior added a foreboding feeling in spite of the festive decorations. The clock on the mantle pounded out seven ponderous bongs. Helen decided to go to the wet bar and make a martini to calm her nerves. Returning to the living room, she sat on the sofa and sipped the potent Grey Goose cocktail while snow danced on the wind across the picture window. She wondered how Harry would ever make it to Medford in this blizzard.

Suddenly, the phone, ringing on the end table beside her, startled her so much she spilled a third of her martini. Picking up the receiver, she heard Harry's voice mingled with a crowd of unhappy commuters in the background.

"Can you hear me, honey?"

"Barely. Where are you?"

"I'm at Penn Station in Newark. The commuter trains on the Northeast Corridor line have been delayed two hours due power outages because of the storm. I decided to park the car

at Trenton rather than Hamilton, which gives me more choices on the trains."

"Harry, I told you to leave early. I made dinner. Malcolm did a wonderful job on the Christmas tree and the decorations. The champagne is chilling. And you know I hate to be alone in this big, old house at night."

"The special meeting went on forever, and I didn't know there was a blizzard going on outside. The conference room where we met didn't have windows."

"Well, I'm sure you're doing the best you can, but don't fall asleep waiting for the train like you did last month. Set the alarm on your cell."

"I promise I'll be there as soon as I can. Do you think you could drive over to Laura's house until I get there?"

"I couldn't get the car in the garage, and now I can't even see it in the driveway the snow has drifted so high. I can't get out, and I'm worried you won't be able to get here even if you get to Trenton."

"Wild horses couldn't keep me from spending Christmas Eve with you, darling. I know you're disappointed in me, but wait till you see the surprise I have for you."

The lights flickered for a moment, and Helen gasped.

"What is it?" Harry quaked as a background of static crept into the line.

"The lights flickered. Maybe the power is about to go off."

"Don't think about the bad things that could happen. You'll whip yourself into a frenzy. Do you have your medication with you?"

"Yes, I have it, but I can't drink alcohol if I take it," Helen lamented. "I want this night to be romantic and special."

She heard the front door creak and paused a beat so Harry wouldn't hear a tremor in her voice, "Well, I'll see you when you get here. Let me know if you are delayed any longer than expected. Love you. Bye."

Helen turned the channel on the TV to a news station with the remote. Immediately, she heard the weather report. "South Jersey is calling for thirty inches of snow by morning," the announcer said, showing off his pearly white teeth. "The highway department issued a travel advisory to stay off the

roads unless it is a medical emergency. This could be the largest snowfall in thirty-one years."

On the strip scrolling across the bottom of the screen she saw the following alarming words, "A criminally insane patient committed for murdering two people fifteen years ago has escaped from the Princeton Sanitarium."

"Whoopee. A lunatic is on the loose to add to the list of creepy things that will make me crazy in this noisy, old house," Helen muttered. She changed the channel to reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* to lighten the mood.

Heavy snow continued to fall outside, and the wind continued to howl. She watched the reflection of the Christmas lights blinking on and off in the large picture window overlooking the frozen lake for a time. Then, feeling too exposed to the darkness outside, she got up and pulled the curtain. She did not want the maniac to know she was alone in the house if he was out there.

Sitting back on the sofa, she chuckled to herself about how long any person would last if they were outside in this hellish snowstorm.

The levity ended abruptly when someone rang the front doorbell. Helen rose from the sofa and felt the hairs rising on the back of her neck as she pondered her next move. No one in his right mind would be out on a night like this. No one, that is, except an escaped maniac who had no other place to go.

She crept to the door and tried to sneak a peek through the peephole. The front door light was not on, and all she could see was a shadow moving across the opening.

"Please help me," said a desperate, raspy voice from the darkness. "My wife is pregnant, and I've run out of gas on Route 70 on my way to the hospital, and my cell died. I need to use your phone. Please let me in."

Helen remained silent, fearing the man was lying, but still fearing the consequences if she didn't help the poor couple in distress.

"Please. I know you're in there. I can hear the television."

Helen stammered, "I can't open the door. The news just said there's a maniac on the loose in the area. I'll call 9-1-1 for you, but I can't open the door. You say your car is on Route

70?”

Helen saw the shadow move away from the door. She listened for a reply, but the howling wind was the only sound.

“I really want to help you. Give me your name, the make of your car, and I’ll call 9-1-1.”

Helen listened, but there was no answer. She turned on the porch light, and to her surprise, saw no one at the door. She could only see the steady torrent of snow drifting onto the porch. Her heart raced as she tried to make sense of what had just happened. “The stranger must have been lying about his pregnant wife,” she thought, “he only wanted her to open the door. Could the maniac really be outside?”

She ran to the phone and listened for a dial tone. Nothing. Were the lines down, or did the stranger cut the connection to the house? Opening her purse, she rummaged around for her cell. Finding it, she punched in 9-1-1 and could not believe it when she heard a voice on the line, “Hello, what is your emergency?”

Helen spoke in a flurry, relaying the details of what the man who had come to my door had said and added, “Now that it’s clear he didn’t need to use the phone, I’m deathly afraid the man outside is the maniac who escaped from the sanitarium.”

“What’s your name and address?” asked the emergency operator.

“Helen Pierce. My address is 928 Lakeshore Drive, Medford.”

“I’ll call the sheriff’s department and try to get someone out there, but the number of calls we’re receiving due to the weather are….” The voice ended abruptly. She tried several more times, but there was no longer any service.

Helen turned off the television, plunging the house into darkness except for the Christmas lights on the tree and the glow of the logs in the fireplace. A moment later, she jumped when she heard a cinder fall through the grate. The bushes scraping the windows and the whistle of the wind seeping in from under the thresholds caused her to turn the television back on to hide the mixture of creepy sounds that continued to unnerve her.

The stranger at the door was the only thing on her mind. Could she or Malcolm have left a window or door unlocked? It was such a big house, and there were so many windows and doors.

If only the police would come. If only Harry would come. Then, a terrible thought gripped her, “What if Harry came home, and the maniac attacked him before he could get inside the house? Someone could easily be lurking in one of the outbuildings just a stone’s throw away.”

Every fifteen minutes, she picked up the phone and tried to get a dial tone. She also tried her cell, and as before, there was still no service. Whatever happened, she was on her own.

The front doorbell rang again. Hoping, by some miracle, the police had actually responded to her 9-1-1 call, she ran to the door and looked through the small opening. Helen couldn’t believe her eyes when she saw a man in a blue uniform wearing a hat in the glow of the porch light.

“This is the Medford police. Did you report a prowler?” the man said, trying to see through the peephole.

Helen immediately sensed that the policeman’s raspy voice sounded very much like the voice of the stranger who had come earlier. “Can you show me your badge?” she said, stalling before opening the door.

The police officer stepped back into the light, and Helen noticed a spray of blood on the silver badge fastened to the chest of his uniform. She stood paralyzed in fear as the officer looked down at his shield, and wiping away the blood with his glove, he said, “I‘m sorry you had to see that. It’s dark out here, and I didn’t see the splatter until I stepped under the light. In any case, I’m freezing my balls off out here and need to come inside. Make it easy on yourself. Open the door, or I’ll kick it in. I promise I won’t hurt you. It’s Christmas, isn’t it? It’s the season to be merry. What do you say?”

Helen remained silent and moved away from the door. Picking up the remote, she turned off the TV and the Christmas lights.

When the lights went out, and Helen did not open the door, the man made several futile attempts to muscle down

the thick, solid oak door. She heard him cursing after each thunderous kick.

Time passed, and then came the earsplitting report of a gun on the front porch. A large hole appeared in the right panel of the door, followed by another blast that created a similar hole in the lower left panel next to the jamb.

Helen stifled a scream and ran into a dark recess off the foyer. Opening a door that she assumed had not been opened for years, she inched into the black hallway that led toward the section of the house where her bedroom was located when she was a child. The light from the fireplace dimly illuminated the hall. Clouds of dust motes filled the opening as she closed the door and locked it, plunging the hall into total darkness.

She felt the sensation of déjà vu sending shivers up her backbone. Even in the complete darkness, she remembered this hallway like it was yesterday. She had played hide and go seek with her siblings countless times, and she knew every inch of the space even in the dark. Memories of the past returned as she felt for the first doorknob on the right side of the hall.

When Helen touched the cold, round doorknob, fond images of Jimmy, her younger brother, flooded her mind. Poor Jimmy. She could see his bushy red hair and his big brown eyes, but most of all; she remembered how blue his lips were when Malcolm covered him with a piece of tarp the day he drowned in the lake.

She heard more gunfire in the main house and the sound of breaking glass. She heard the muffled shouts of the stranger behind the locked door as she moved deeper into the long corridor.

Touching the second knob on the right, she saw her younger sister in her memory, running playfully through the green grass in the yard. Poor Gillian. She had died when Helen was twelve. She fell through the ice on the lake. The image of her being taken away in a black body bag haunted her to this day.

She trembled when she touched the third knob, which had been her older brother’s room. Helen had loved him dearly until the day he tried to strangle her in the bathtub.

Thank God, Malcolm had come home unexpectedly and saved her. Poor Hugo. She had never forgotten the look on his face when the police took him away in handcuffs. During the trial, he confessed to killing their parents and later Jimmy and Gillian on the lake. He was such a handsome boy until he ravaged his face with a butcher knife. He had been committed to the Princeton Sanitarium for what seemed like an eternity.

Suddenly, the possibility that it could have been Hugo who escaped from the institution registered for the first time. “Wouldn’t that be an incredible coincidence?” she thought. “The news flash did not give the name of the person the police were searching for, but she remembered the reporter had said he’d been committed fifteen years ago.” Her face darkened when she did the math and found Hugo went to the insane asylum about fifteen years ago. If it was Hugo who escaped, could he find his way back to this house in the middle of a blizzard after all these years? She hoped not, for her sake.

Finally, Helen touched the last doorknob at the end of the hall and opened it. This was the room her parents said to go to if someone ever broke into the house.

Inside the outer door, the wall looked like a bank vault. Turning on the light, she spun a cylinder and pushed open the heavy steel door. Helen crawled through the center of the opening and turned on a new set of internal lights and a generator switch to activate the heat and air conditioning, and then closed the door. The interior of the space had a sink with running water and a telephone. The space was initially created in the ‘50’s as a bomb shelter and updated as a place to go in an emergency just before her parents were killed in 1995.

She picked up the telephone and found it as dead as the phone in the living room. She remembered her father telling her this was a dedicated line that would not be affected even if someone cut the connection to the house. She wondered if Malcolm had continued the service even after her parents died. If he had, once the outage was repaired, she would be able to call 9-1-1 and have someone come to her rescue. The intruder could destroy the rest of the house, but he would not be able to reach her in this bomb shelter without high

explosives. This room was both bomb and fireproof.

She was safe, but she still had to find a way to protect Harry from the intruder if she couldn't call for help soon.

She sat down at a desk and turned on a series of surveillance monitors she had loved to play with years ago. She was amazed they still worked. Possibly, Malcolm had been maintaining the system as one of his chores, and he had never mentioned it. In any case, this was a godsend. She wished the old caretaker was here now, but she had left strict instructions for him to take the weekend off.

The monitors showed the rooms inside the house, the parking lot, the porches, and several out buildings. The first screen showed a police car parked at the entrance of their circular driveway in a snow bank under a streetlight. When she panned to a closer view of the side window with the zoom feature, she saw a man in a tee shirt with his face pressed against the side window and another man in a police uniform slumped in the passenger seat next to him. There was a splatter of blood on the glass, and neither man was moving.

In the monitor that showed the living room, she saw the man in the police uniform thrashing about shouting for her to come out of hiding. Then, she saw him looking into the camera lens at a distance and seeing something that tipped him off she was watching him.

He walked up to the camera and said grinning from ear to ear, "Helen, I know Harry is on his way here. If you don't come out, I promise I will cut off his fingers and toes and then his balls right here in the living room so you can see it in your monitor. You don't want that to happen, do you? So…if you'll open the safe in the den, I'll be out of here. Nobody needs to get hurt."

"Who was this killer?" she thought. "He didn't sound like a maniac from the sanatorium. Was he the stranger at the door? Did he overhear her conversation with 9-1-1 when she told them to send the police? How did he know their names and the location of the safe?"

The intruder reached up, and grabbing the camera from its perch, disconnected the line. The monitor in the living room went black. Helen tried the phones again to see if service had

been restored, but nothing had changed. She tried to think of a Plan B if Harry arrived before she could reach the police.

She had several rifles in the shelter, but she had never fired a gun and had always hoped she never would.

As the hours passed, the snow continued to fall relentlessly across the landscape outside. She could hear the killer ranting for her to come out on several of the inside monitors, but she continued to stay within the safety of the impenetrable shelter.

Then, Helen's worst fears were realized when she saw headlights approaching through the swirling snow in the monitor. She recognized Harry's Hummer fishtailing up the hill. After pausing at the police car that was completely covered in a drift, the Hummer proceeded past two other abandoned vehicles and plowed its way toward the circular driveway leading to the front entrance.

Helen punched in Harry's number, but just as before, she could not get through. She watched Harry struggle to open his car door, and after exiting, lost him in a snow bank between the driveway and the front door. Poor Harry was walking into certain death. She had to act fast and take drastic action if she had any chance of saving his life.

She opened a cabinet on the wall and taking the Glock from the shelf, verified the gun was loaded. Moving to the entrance, she wasted valuable time trying to figure out how to unlock the massive door. Finally, when it clicked open, she scurried down the dark hallway to the door opening into the foyer.

She heard gunshots explode behind the locked door. Terror gripped her as the thought of Harry being another victim of the killer who'd broken into the house. Determined to blow his ass away if he had hurt poor defenseless Harry no matter what the consequences, she quietly opened the door to the foyer and peered into the dimly lit expanse of the main house.

The embers in the fireplace provided the only light as she moved forward as stealthily as she could. The same irritating noises that had plagued her all night clouded the sound of anyone moving in the dark living room. She slid

down onto the ceramic tile floor, and crawling slowly toward the center of the enormous room, she listened for the slightest unfamiliar sound.

Trembling with a level of crippling fear she had never experienced, she pointed the handgun into the darkness and inched forward.

Suddenly, Helen's hand felt something wet and slippery on the tile. A dark shape lay motionless on the floor in front of her. Unable to avoid the pool of warm blood surrounding the body of a man, she shimmied forward on her stomach. Then, she made out the outline of the silver badge and saw the distorted face of the killer in the light that remained from the flickering firelight.

With a burst of elation, she stood up and screamed, "Harry! Where are you?"

"I'm here, my darling," came a shout from the center of the dark living room.

"I thought I'd lost you. Thank God, that awful man is dead. I was so afraid. He killed the policemen, and I was certain he would kill you, too."

She ran to Harry, threw his arms around him, and kissed him passionately. He stood rigid and did not reciprocate with a warm embrace. She felt something heavy in his breast pocket as the tears started to roll down her face.

Feeling the sticky substance on her dress, Harry recoiled with a sudden start, and looked at her coldly. "Helen, you're covered with blood. Have you been shot?"

"No, I'm fine. I got his blood all over me when I crawled across the floor. How did you get his gun away from him?"

Harry loosened his grip on her shoulders and stepped back. After an awkward silence, he said, "I brought a gun of my own."

"A gun of your own? Where would you get a gun?" Helen asked dumbfounded.

"I bought one for this occasion. It's the surprise I told you about."

"Surprise? What on earth are you talking about?"

"I decided not to pay Louie the money I promised him to kill you. You should have seen the look on his face when I

pulled the trigger. He never suspected I'd have the balls to do it."

"You paid him to kill me?" Helen choked in disbelief. "I thought you loved me."

"Loved you? I've loathed you from the moment we met, but unfortunately, I couldn't leave without your money. By killing you, I'll have it all, which will allow me to continue enjoying the lifestyle I've grown accustomed to."

"You ungrateful bastard. You'll never get away with it." Helen stammered.

"I think I will. Louie killed you, and I killed Louie in self-defense. There's nothing to tie me to the three-time loser. It's the perfect crime."

"I have a big surprise for you, too, my darling." Raising the Glock, she said coldly, "I have a gun of my own." She saw the priceless shock in Harry's eyes as he made a feeble attempt to draw his gun just as Helen planted two gaping holes in his midsection. The impact of the bullets sent him flying backwards into the coffee table. His gun skittered across the tile floor.

Helen walked over, placed the barrel in the middle of his forehead, and considered obliterating his pathetic face from her memory. But reconsidering, she decided such an act would be too hard to explain to the police.

Suddenly, the overhead lights came on, and she winced seeing how the scarlet pools of blood clashed with the living room's beige color scheme. She wiped her fingerprints from her gun and placed it in the stranger's hand. Her story would be the intruder shot Harry with a gun he found in the master bedroom, and Harry managed to return fire and kill the intruder before he died. She would say she was an eyewitness to the gruesome affair, and poor Harry saved her life.

Based on her stature in the community and the reputation of her parents, she did not think she would come under suspicion at all. She had not been a suspect before when her parents, Jimmy, and Gillian's deaths were investigated. She had never known why Hugo had confessed to all the murders she had committed after he tried to strangle

her. The gentle giant had always done things no one in the family could understand, even as a child.

She went to the wet bar in the study and made a very dry martini. Returning to the living room, she opened the curtains, and turned on the Christmas lights on the tree. Taking a seat on the sofa, she listened to the unsettling sounds with a new frame of mind. Somehow, after what she had been through, they didn't seem to bother her as much.

She could not believe she'd fallen in love and lived in harmony with Harry for so long, not knowing, he loathed her. He had fooled her completely. She had never in her wildest dreams imagined he had married her for her money. He had certainly played a convincing role in the bedroom. At least, she had enjoyed her share of blissful orgasms.

Harry had certainly been a handsome devil. He had always reminded her of Clint Eastwood in *Play Misty For Me*. If he had never loved her, she wondered about the affairs he must have had along the way. Oh well. She would start looking for someone new in a month or so. If it didn't work out, there was still a lot of water in the lake or in the ocean, whichever worked best.

She had always been a cold, ruthless woman. Someone who knew what she wanted and how to get it. Even as a little girl, she had never liked to share. She had to be number one. Always. When her parents favored Jimmy and Gillian right from the start, they had unknowingly written their death warrants.

Helen remembered her parents screaming for mercy as the flames enveloped their master bedroom suite. She had barricaded the bedroom door and trapped them inside. They couldn't escape through the windows because of the security bars. Afterward, she removed the two by fours before calling the fire department, and no one knew the difference. Everyone suspected her parents had passed out from smoke inhalation and never tried to reach the door to escape.

She could still hear their pathetic screams even now, but not once had she lost one minute of sleep regretting having all their wealth for herself. She could still hear Jimmy and Gillian pleading for help after she pushed them off the yacht into the

deep water. Neither of them could swim worth a damn, but Gillian made a gallant attempt treading water until her head finally went under that last time. It took so long for her to drown; Helen thought she might have to give her a whack in the head with one of the lifeboat oars. Thankfully, she finally stayed under without the extra effort.

Poor Hugo was the only one who could see the evil in her. He knew what she was capable of all along. When her parents died, he looked at her with that knowing smirk on his face. The same one he had on his face when her brother and sister had been carried away in body bags from the lake. I guess he knew he would be next, and that's why he decided to strike first. Thank God Malcolm was there to save her.

She picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1. She told the woman who answered her gruesome story with all the remorse and emotion she could muster. Afterward, she put down the phone and took a sip of her martini. Outside, the snow falling on the lake brought back fond memories of Jimmy and Gillian and the wonderful holidays they had shared before she killed them. She watched the Christmas tree lights blinking on and off in her memory.

Like a ghost from the past, the reflection of a tall shape in a hospital robe shambled into view from behind her in the picture window. She recognized the same infernal smirk on his haggard, scarred face as his strong hands gripped her neck the same as they had so many years before. Only this time, Malcolm had the day off.

She wondered if the gentle giant would stop strangling her if she asked him about Osgood, his favorite teddy bear. She wanted so much to make him stop; there was so much more life she wanted to live.

With her last gasp, she pursed her lips and mouthed the only words she could think to say, "Hugo, forgive me."

World Domination

Returning to his aisle seat to the right in the last row of first class, Barry noticed the words “World Domination” scroll up on the laptop of the young man seated at the window in the opposite corner. He saw the monitor explode into hundreds of virtual pieces. Then, the words “Mission Accomplished!” twirled end over end from the right and blinked several times while skyrockets and confetti filled the screen.

Barry was seated next to an elderly woman who had been reading *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* since they boarded. The aisle seat next to the gamer was vacant According to the desk clerk at check in, their flight from Orlando to Philadelphia was sold out, and Barry wondered why the seat was empty.

When the flight attendant stopped to ask for a second drink order, Barry couldn’t resist inquiring about it.

The attendant turned her body to block the view from behind her and whispered, “The young man purchased both seats and left strict instructions he did not want to be disturbed.”

“Two first class tickets. That’s impressive.”

“It’s unusual, but not unheard of,” she said and scurried off.

Barry picked up a magazine from the seat pocket and started browsing to kill some time. He continued to glance over at the gamer now and then. It was obvious he was in his own virtual world, oblivious to everything around him. About every fifteen minutes, the young man, who Barry estimated to be in his late twenties, jotted something down on a clipboard he kept on the empty seat next to him. Barry could see two groups of four vertical lines with a diagonal line across both of them and a third group with four vertical lines. He guessed this meant fourteen items of some kind.

When his second gin and tonic arrived with a bag of peanuts, Barry noticed the flight attendant place a bucket full of ice with a bottle of Dom Perignon champagne chilling inside on the tray table in front of the empty seat across the aisle. It was apparent by the way the gamer moved his shoulders and manipulated a strange looking joystick, he was still consumed by whatever game he was playing and chose to ignore the champagne. Despite what looked to be expensive headphones covering his ears, Barry could hear occasional bursts of explosions, followed by the tumultuous sound byte, “Ta Da!”

The gamer took a pen from his shirt pocket and drew a diagonal line across the third grouping on his pad. Reaching for the bottle of champagne, he removed the cork, poured a crystal goblet of the bubbly, and took a satisfying sip.

When the flight attendant came by for a third drink order, Barry said, “If I wanted a bottle of whatever he’s drinking, how much would it set me back?”

“Eleven hundred.”

“Really. Do you stock thousand dollar bottles of wine as a matter of course?”

“No, you have to request it in advance.”

“Should I know this guy? Is he Eminem or Usher? You know… Some famous rapper.”

The flight attendant smiled and said, “Would you like another gin and tonic?”

Suddenly the fasten-seat-belt light came on with its familiar chime, and the speaker above his head crackled to life. Barry recognized the voice as the pilot from his earlier announcements, but this time, it had an emotional overtone, “What I’m about to tell you is beyond comprehension. I have received triple confirmation that the world we have known will never be the same again. During the last thirty minutes, the fifteen largest U.S. cities, Washington DC, and the state of Israel have been incinerated by nuclear bombs. The President, his Cabinet, and all the member of congress were killed in a session at the US Capitol. All the people in a fifty-mile radius of ground zero in each of the targeted cities are presumed dead. Iran has taken credit for the terrorist attack, and as a consequence, our government has retaliated with nuclear warheads, which have eradicated the entirety of the Middle East countries.”

The passengers in front of him along with the flight attendants started weeping uncontrollably as the pilot continued his unfathomable report; “Our country is under military rule until some form of government can be restored.”

The pilot’s voice broke into sobs, and then he painfully continued, “New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, San Jose, Jacksonville, Indianapolis, San Francisco, Austin, & Columbus, Ohio no longer exist.” The announcement ended abruptly.

Barry was an only child, and his parents lived in Satsuma, Alabama, which was in a location not affected by the attack. He started thinking of the many people he had befriended in his life who lived in the cities the pilot had mentioned. He was thankful he could not think of anyone close to him who might be a casualty unless they had stopped in one of the targeted cities that day.

The final destination of this flight had been Philadelphia. He wondered where they would land in light of what had

happened. Would his apartment in Princeton still be there? What would life be like under military rule? Would his parents still receive their social security checks each month? Would there still be television programs to watch? Everything about the future was a mystery.

Looking around, he saw that most of the passengers had their heads in their hands with tears streaming down their faces. The flight attendants had stopped responding to passenger requests. An assortment of shrieks and wails emanated from the coach section behind him.

The young man, who continued to play his video game on his laptop, was the only passenger in first class who remained indifferent to the pilot's announcement. The gamer continued to pound on his armrest with his eyes riveted to the screen. Not once did Barry see him lift his head to survey his surroundings.

Barry looked at his watch. The plane was scheduled to land in fifteen minutes.

"Shit!" the gamer cried out in disgust, apparently disturbed by something that had happened in the game. Looking over at him, Barry saw the following words scroll up on the computer screen, "You have been nuked and have only one life to live. Prepare to kiss your ass goodbye…."

Barry unstrapped his seatbelt, and standing, reached over from the aisle and tapped the young man on the shoulder. The gamer looked at him with disgust, obviously incensed by the interruption, and without removing his headphones, said belligerently, "What is it? I'm right in the middle of a life and death situation, and I can't afford to lose my concentration without dire consequences."

Barry wondered how he would react when he heard the catastrophic news. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought you should know that fifteen of the largest US cities, Washington DC and Israel have been nuked by Iran and no longer exist. Everyone who lived there is dead. The US response to the terrorist attack was to blow away the Middle Eastern countries. Does this rank as an acceptable reason to interrupt your mindless game?"

The gamer looked at Barry like a turd on the bottom of

his Gucci shoes and said in his most pompous tone, “I have no time for small talk. You are not equipped to understand all the forces in play in *World Domination*. Please stop distracting me. I have only one life remaining and need my full concentration.”

The gamer turned away from Barry and resumed play on his laptop. Barry saw a cityscape light up and a mushroom cloud form above it, followed by the rushing force of liquid fire that obliterated every building on his computer screen.

The words, “Word Domination” scrolled vertically across the screen, and then, “Fort Worth Nuked” flashed in front of the incinerated cityscape. Then came the muffled musical interlude, “Ta Da!” in the headphones. The gamer turned and looked at Barry with venomous disgust; perturbed he was still standing in the aisle watching his game.

“What an idiot,” Barry said, returning to his seat. Pulling a blank piece of paper from his pad, he wrote a heavy handed message in a black felt tipped marker and placed it on the gamer’s empty seat. It read, “I’m not joking, asshole.”

The gamer ignored the message and continued playing.

A minute later, when the pilot announced Fort Worth had been added to the list of cities nuked; Barry looked at the gamer in an entirely different light. He imagined the devil himself sitting across the aisle from him as he reviewed the order of events.

He had just seen Fort Worth disintegrate on the creep’s laptop. Looking across at the notepad on the empty seat, he saw three groups of five plus one vertical line, which meant the total of something the geek was tracking was sixteen. Was it a coincidence sixteen of the largest US cities had been blown off the face of the earth? Was it also a coincidence the same city he had just seen being incinerated on the laptop was the same one the pilot had just added to the list? Could the obnoxious asshole sitting across from him be personally responsible for the death and destruction of millions of innocent people all over the world?

In Barry’s mind’s eye, the gamer’s face seemed to morph into something diabolically evil. What he saw was no longer human. He batted his eyes, and the devilish thing he

thought he saw was again just the young man playing a game on his laptop.

Suddenly the gamer pounded on his armrest, knocked the bucket of champagne off the tray table, and cheered like he had just won the power ball lotto. He grabbed his notepad and added two more vertical lines to a second set of groupings Barry had not noticed below the first set of sixteen.

“One last sector and it will all be over,” he said with sweat rolling down his face. His split computer screen showed two more cities disintegrating as fireworks and confetti replaced the fire and smoke of the destroyed cities. The loudest “Ta Da!” yet burst from the headphones, and the words “Mission Accomplished” pulsed on and off in rainbow colors.

A robotic voice in the computer said, “One life left, and one sector remaining to win “World Domination”.

Barry looked into the feverish, soulless eyes and cringed at the insidious grin on the face across from him. In that moment, he was convinced the gamer was the instigator of the world’s destruction. He believed without any reservation that the fate of humankind was in his hands. No one around him knew this maniac was only one step away from finalizing his insidious plot.

Barry jumped from his seat, grabbed the gamer’s laptop, and smashed it against every surface he could see around him. Afterward, he threw it on the floor and stomped on it several times. He heard a robotic voice croak, ”Game over” as the screen flickered and went out.

The gamer scrambled from his seat and pounced on Barry, sending him to the floor. Like a wild man, he pummeled him with vicious blows and screamed, “You’ve killed us all, you moron!”

He broke Barry’s nose and pounded his face into a bloody pulp until he finally realized what he was doing wouldn’t make a hill of beans worth of difference now. Pushing back on the carpet and leaning against the seat behind him, the gamer picked up the bottle of champagne from the floor and took a swig of the bubbly left inside. The passengers and the flight attendants paid no attention to the

outburst behind them. Each of them had their own personal losses to deal with, and nothing else mattered.

A voice resonated from the speakers throughout the plane, barely recognizable as the pilot, “We have just received word that China and North Korea have been obliterated by unidentified nuclear weapons in response to their mounting an additional attack on the United States. Russia has initiated a similar attack, and their warheads will enter our airspace at any moment. I am told there is little hope that our military in its current state can prevent the impending incineration of our country. May God have mercy on our souls.”

Barry looked at the battered laptop on the floor with a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. The last thing he saw was a great white light, and then there was nothing.

About Billy Wells

Thanks for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it.

As a boy, I read a story entitled The October Game by Ray Bradbury in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology paperback. That story not only chilled me to the bone, but it inspired me to write horror stories of my own. I submitted one of my early attempts, Black As Night, to Ruth Tisinger, my high school English teacher. Knowing she hated scary stories and would be grading it for the next day's class at night, I included the following note at the end of the story for additional effect, "Now, Mrs. Tisinger, as you sit streaking my paper with scarlet, someone could be watching you through the window. Are you alone?"

From those humble beginnings, I have written 177 short stories, mostly horror, with surprise endings. and publishedI ten horror story collections. I've seen more movies than anyone I've ever known and enjoy most genres, but a good horror film has always been my favorite. My dream would be to see some of the stories in this book in a movie or a TV show.

Reviews In Today's World

In the past, when everyone knew everyone else in their neighborhood, people used to share information about the good and bad things they discovered to help each other in their day-to-day living.

Now, in this global village where we are in touch with everyone and everything in nanoseconds, Amazon monitors what readers say about what they read in order to distinguish the good from the bad.

Since reviews are the life's blood of today's authors, and we depend on them more than ever before, I would sincerely appreciate it if you would place a review of this book on amazon.com. It does not have to be long; only a minimum of twenty words is required.

If you place a review on whatever site you bought my book, I will hold you in high regard for all eternity, and I may include you in my will.

Other Books By Billy Wells

Don’t Look Behind You: A Collection of Horror
Billy Wells Horror Anthology I
Black As Night
Shivers & Other Nightmares
In Your Face Horror
Thrillers & Chillers
Thrillers & Chillers 2
Something In the Dark and Other Nightmares
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 1
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 2
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 3
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 4
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 5
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 6

Singles
It Lurks On the Mountain
The Tomb
Cold Calls
The Caller From Hell
Forbidden Fruit
The Reckoning (From Scary Stories- Vol. 2)
Crawlspace (From Scary Stories 4)

Links To Billy Wells Sites:

billywellshorror.com home page
Billy Wells Horror Pinterest
Billy Wells Coffeesmoke You Tube Channel
Billy Wells Author's Den Page